

PHOTOGRAPHIC CULTURE AND THE AMERICAN THIRTIES

By

STEVEN ANDERSON SPENCE

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

1999

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For her encouragement, insight, and direction during the early stages of this project, I owe a great debt to Professor Anne Goodwyn Jones. To my wife, Virginia Bonner, I offer my love, my gratitude for her patience and support, and my promise to repay the favor as she completes her own dissertation.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTERS	
1 PHOTOGRAPHY, CULTURAL HISTORY, AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION .....	1
2 AESTHETICS, SUBJECTIVITY, AND FORTUNE'S WOMEN .....	23
3 VINCENT VAN GOGH, WALKER EVANS, AND THE UTILITY OF MODERN ART .....	45
The Van Gogh Phenomenon .....	48
From the Borinage to Arles.....	52
Walker Evans: Art and the Machine .....	66
4 REALISM, SURREALISM, AND ADVERTISING: LIFE MAGAZINE AND FAULKNER'S IF I FORGET THEE, JERUSALEM .....	96
Life's "Eye with a Brain" .....	112
A Portrait of the Artist as Surrealist Woman.....	138
5 AFTERWORD: WALTER BENJAMIN COMES TO LIFE .....	157
REFERENCES .....	173
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .....	186

Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School  
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

PHOTOGRAPHIC CULTURE AND THE AMERICAN THIRTIES

By

Steven Anderson Spence

May 1999

Chair: Marsha Bryant  
Major Department: English

Photography's current primacy within U.S. culture stems from sources both ancient and modern, including the optical technologies of the Renaissance as well as the development of modern film, advertising, and public relations industries during the 1920s. In the decade of the 1930s, however, Americans' dependence on the camera reached a kind of critical mass. Focusing on the growing influence of photographic print media during the Great Depression, the dissertation offers a new understanding of twentieth-century American culture. Analysis of the era's picture magazines, tabloid newspapers, and documentary books demonstrates the impact of a rhetorical form that may be called "montage logic" on both the language of the U.S. public sphere and on the era's artistic practice. Brought to widespread American audiences through new media like Time Inc.'s Fortune and Life magazines, montage logic's disjunctive combinations affected art as well as politics. By relocating their work within this cultural context, the



dissertation offers new readings of a number of important visual and literary artists, including the photographers Margaret Bourke-White and Walker Evans and the authors James Agee and William Faulkner. In addition, it demonstrates that the popularity of two art exhibitions staged in the 1930s by New York's Museum of Modern Art—"Vincent van Gogh" and "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism"—resulted from their correspondence with the visual, montage logic that increasingly shaped public discourse in the United States. Bringing to light the kinships of journalism and late modernism during the decade, the dissertation also demonstrates that post-war theories of a rigid dichotomy separating high art from a monolithic mass culture obscure more than they reveal about the culture of 1930s America. Finally, the study demonstrates that inter-war pictorial journalism also shaped the social theory of one of the era's most influential thinkers, the German critic, historian, and philosopher Walter Benjamin. Germany's illustrierte Zeitung pioneered the photographic journalism later popularized in the United States by Life, and this media form also offers a close material analogue to the dialectical image, Benjamin's central theoretical tool.

## CHAPTER 1 PHOTOGRAPHY, CULTURAL HISTORY, AND THE AMERICAN THIRTIES

Photography's current primacy within U.S. culture stems from sources both ancient and modern, including the optical technologies of the Renaissance as well as the development of modern film, advertising, and public relations industries during the 1920s. In the decade of the 1930s, however, Americans' dependence on the camera reached a kind of critical mass, a fact apparent to many contemporary observers. A 1938 study of tabloid newspapers in the United States, for example, argued that by the late thirties "it was safe to say that the average citizen acquired most of his news through the medium of pictures" (Bessie 236). Although cultural traditionalists decried the tabloids' vulgarity and sensationalism, Bessie argued that this new pictorial journalism reflected the tempo and vitality of modern industrial life. The tabloids put into practice "the century's most up-to-date techniques and attitudes," Bessie wrote, and as a result they quickly entrenched themselves in the daily habits of city and town dwellers throughout the country (26). As Bessie's study itself indicated, photographic culture's evolution in the years between the wars resulted in a broad range of statistical and publishing "firsts": the founding of the New York Illustrated Daily News, the nation's first "tabloid picture paper," in 1919; the same newspaper's claim, six years later, to the largest circulation of any U.S. daily; the founding of the Associated Press (AP) Picture Service in 1928; the consolidation and standardization of Hollywood cinema in the 1920s, and the industry's

claim to a weekly audience of more than 100 million, first made in 1929; the launch of photographic wire services, by the AP and competitors, in 1935-36; the first publications of Life magazine and a dozen competing "weekly picture magazines," in 1936-37; the wholesale shift from graphic to photographic illustration in national advertising, effected by the middle 1930s; and the two-thirds increase, between 1930 and 1938, in the percentage of space devoted to photographs by the major metropolitan daily newspapers.<sup>1</sup> Throughout these years, Americans increasingly turned from printed text to photography and radio as the preeminent media of public discourse; the watershed event that Bessie located in the middle thirties represented, therefore, a transformation of the apparatus structuring not just "the news," but most facets of the public sphere in the United States.

Even concentrating solely on the print media—and thereby neglecting the transformative effects of network radio, Hollywood cinema, and newsreel journalism—the quantitative effects of this shift demonstrate a radical change in the language structuring U.S. public discourse. The qualitative effects are more difficult to measure, and this dissertation represents a contribution to this task. As a beginning, I will argue that many of our most common assumptions about the culture of the 1930s need rethinking.

---

<sup>1</sup> On the history of newspapers in this era, see Mott (682-85) and Bleyer (422-27). On Depression-era Hollywood film, see Bergman. On the New York Daily News and other tabloids, see Bessie. On advertising, see Marchand (149-53). For a contemporary response to the development of the picture magazines through 1938, see Edwards.

Ask Americans about the decade of the Great Depression and you will likely encounter images painted from a drab palette. Today "the thirties" often brings to mind grainy black-and-white footage of breadlines and labor riots, black-and-white photographs of dust storms and destitute farmers, and perhaps the faded red of a communist pamphlet that slipped through the net of McCarthyism and the Cold War. The dissertation challenges this image of the decade, but it does not renounce the documentary record that provided so many of the era's most important images. Unquestionably, the monochrome eloquence of films like The Plow that Broke the Plains, documentary books like You Have Seen Their Faces, photographs like Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother," and Arthur Rothstein's "Dust Storm, Cimarron County" reveal truths that must continue to shape historical understanding.<sup>2</sup> But the 1930s also brought brightly colored, fantastic revelations: Disney's Snow White in 1937, for example, and The Wizard of Oz in 1939. Color-coordinated bathrooms and kitchens triumphed in the thirties, as did plastics, mass-produced color photography, and the hallucinogenic, spiraling blues and yellows of Vincent van Gogh, popularized by Irving Stone's 1934 Lust for Life and a widely influential exhibition staged by New York's Museum of Modern Art. Rather than replace documentary realism with these more polychrome visions, however, the dissertation juxtaposes these two strands of modern image-making,

---

<sup>2</sup> Lange, Rothstein, and Walker Evans account for the best known photographs among the more than 130,000 compiled between 1935 and 1943 by the federal documentary corps under the direction of Roy Stryker. These images are now housed in the Farm Security Administration file at the Library of Congress. The standard histories of New Deal documentary are Anderson, Hurley, and Stott. Useful revisions may be found in Curtis, Daniel, Fisher, Guimond, Natanson, and Tagg.

returning them to their original proximity. In the photographic media of the 1930s, pictorial realism and fantasy often traveled together, within complex imbrications structured by the logic of a visual, rather than a verbal, syntax. These twinned discursive systems—including, for example, photojournalism and photographic advertising—may be roughly distinguished as materialist and idealist, depending on claims either to an objective or a subjective truth. Through analyses of the era's newspapers, picture magazines, museum exhibitions, and documentary books, the dissertation reveals that the ascendancy of photographic culture in the 1930s brought materialism and idealism into new relationships, sustaining incommensurable and often flatly contradictory messages within a nonetheless connected and persuasive structure. Each of the following chapters investigates such a mosaic of materialist and idealist expression, shedding light in the process on the rich, conflicting legacies of Depression-era American culture.

In focusing on the links between such disparate systems of meaning, my study is indebted to the traditions of Western Marxism, and in particular to the work of Frankfurt School critics including Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Jürgen Habermas, and Walter Benjamin. Adorno and Horkheimer's groundbreaking Dialectic of Enlightenment, for example, presented the U.S. photographic magazines as a prime example of the "culture industry" and its effects on human perception. Adorno and Horkheimer argued that

In the most influential American magazines, Life and Fortune, a quick glance can now scarcely distinguish advertising from editorial picture and text. The latter features an enthusiastic and gratuitous account of the great man (with illustrations of his life and grooming habits) which will bring him new fans, while the advertisement pages use so many factual photographs and details that they represent the ideal of information which the editorial part has only begun to try to achieve. (163)

For Adorno and Horkheimer, this collapse of difference between advertising and editorial matter indicated far more than simply the corruption of journalism. Instead, these popular new magazines manifest a more fundamental reformation of perception itself. First published in 1944, Dialectic of Enlightenment interpreted the banal sterility it discovered within contemporary American culture as the effect of a new stage of capitalism. The triumph of monopoly capital, Adorno and Horkheimer argued, had dissolved the relative autonomy of economic base and cultural superstructure that characterized the nineteenth-century societies analyzed by Marx. At this new stage, the commodity form colonized any and all manifestations of culture, finally subsuming consciousness itself under the regime of capitalist exchange value. Here photo-realism became indistinguishable from advertising, because human subjects came to perceive reality itself solely through the framework of the commodity structure.

Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry hypothesis provided a powerful critique of the homogenized and normative visions of American society that dominated the mass media in the years following World War II. As a result, Dialectic of Enlightenment attained the height of its influence in the 1940s and fifties, years that also saw the primacy of classical Hollywood cinema, network radio and television, and mass magazines like Reader's Digest and Life. For Adorno, the only escape from this closed system lay within the austere and hermetically sealed spaces of abstract modern art, and similar critical paradigms dominated American institutions of high culture in these

years.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the twentieth century, however—within an American culture marked by Balkanized "narrow-cast" media and by the cognitive and cultural relativism of postmodernism—the notion of a rigid dichotomy separating high art from a monolithic mass culture appeared far less compelling. As a result, critics rediscovered a vitality and complexity in thirties culture that had been elided by the critical frameworks of the previous generation.<sup>4</sup> Closer attention to the encounters of photo-realism and photographic advertising in the early Fortune and Life, for example, reveals juxtapositions both more complex and more ambivalent than the affirmative great-man-and-grooming-products model presented by Dialectic of Enlightenment. This point may be best made here through an example: two facing pages taken from Rehearsal, a trial run for Time Inc.'s Life, published Sept. 24, 1936, a few weeks before the picture magazine appeared on newsstands.

Rehearsal's pages 44 and 45 demonstrated, in quite different ways, the arresting power of the new photographic media. On page 45, as the central image of a full-page Maxwell House coffee advertisement, Rehearsal's readers encountered a color photograph of the film actors Guy Standing and Gail Patrick, seated and posed with coffee cups behind a silver tea set. Color photography remained an exciting innovation in the thirties, and color photographic reproduction in a weekly magazine with Life's circulation was

---

<sup>3</sup> Good examples of Adorno's mass cultural and modernist art criticism appear among the essays collected in Prisms (e.g. "Perennial Fashion—Jazz" and "Arnold Schoenberg, 1874-1951"). For a highly influential articulation of similar relationships on the American scene, see Clement Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."

<sup>4</sup> Among the richest new readings Depression-era American culture are found in Barnard, Kalaidjian, and Mullen and Linkon's anthology Radical Revisions.

literally unprecedented. For this and many other technical innovations, Time Inc. depended on the inventiveness of its printer R.R. Donnelly & Sons, one of the industry's technological pioneers (Elson 272-73; 284). Rehearsal was itself a sales tool; this colorful tribute to Maxwell House and Hollywood offered prospective advertisers a sample of Life's ability to draw and hold its readers' interest.

Opposite the Maxwell House advertisement, however, Rehearsal presented three photographs intended to draw a very different kind of attention. These were news photographs taken that summer in Barcelona during the first days of the Spanish Civil War. They recorded the images of fourteen corpses of Carmelite nuns, exhumed and displayed by Loyalist sympathizers on the steps of a cathedral (44). Taken soon after Loyalists had defeated the city's rebelling Army garrison, the photographs documented an act of furious and brutal iconoclasm, expressing the Barcelona mob's outrage at both the Fascist rebels and their conservative supporters within the church hierarchy. "In Barcelona," Rehearsal explained, "is to be found everything the Fascist Rebels hate most—all of Spain's anti-Church, anti-monarchy, anti-authority varieties of radicalism." Both the act itself—an anarchic attack on the Church's symbolic authority—and the photographs of this act offer dramatic examples of political warfare waged through imagery.

Several months and thousands of miles distant from the events in Barcelona, the combination of these two pages in Rehearsal formed a bizarre meta-text. Their juxtaposition was surreal, in the sense that it created meanings that were both ineffable and profoundly disturbing. In all probability, no authorial intent lay behind the conjunction of Rehearsal's pages 44 and 45. Nevertheless, the images' physical proximity



created meaning, through a process similar to that of film montage.<sup>5</sup> Concern about such conjunctions arose even before the Life's first issue appeared. Prospective advertisers, for example, argued that the magazine's editorial pictures competed directly with their advertisements, a concern highlighted by a notable layout five months later (Elson 341). On page 32 of Life's Feb. 8, 1937, issue, directly opposite Campbell Soup's circular photograph of an elegantly dressed woman addressing a smiling salesman, Life's editors placed a full-page, close-up photograph of a hippopotamus's rear end. The dominant curves create a visual echo across the page, as both the hippo's posterior and the Campbell's vignette were strongly circular. At least one reader of this layout discovered a bleeding of connotations through juxtaposition: as the result of the ad's placement, Campbell's canceled its contract (Elson 306).

Like the later encounter of soup and hippopotamus, Rehearsal linked its readers' experience of coffee and corpses, constructing an opposition, for example, between the "super-vacuum" of Maxwell House's "Vita-fresh can" and the "rotted graveclothes and a little mummified flesh" evident in the broken caskets on the opposite page. A cartoon character in the Maxwell House ad claims to be "dead tired" and, through the friendly stimulation of coffee, he discovers that he is "coming to life again." Although both gruesome and (probably) unplanned, the parallels with the antic corpses on the opposite page were available to any reader, and they equated the terrifying energies of revolution

---

<sup>5</sup> Montage's most celebrated theorist, for example, the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, defined it as "an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots—shots even opposite one another" (49). Film scholars label similar phenomena the Kuleshov effect, honoring the experiments of another Soviet filmmaker, Lev Kuleshov.

with the magically animating power of the commodity. In reasonable terms this equation is, of course, absurd. That such meanings escaped rationality, however, had little to do with either their existence or their influence. It does suggest that media which create such meanings must be analyzed with attention to the structures of non-rational experience, a fact clear to many observers in the 1930s.

Among the most important effects of the rise of photographic culture, I will suggest, lay in its impact on changing American understandings of "culture" itself. More precisely, the development of a mass culture founded on photographic and electronic media brought the connections linking culture and consciousness into a new visibility, a point emphasized by Warren Susman in his influential essay "The Thirties":

The shift to a culture of sight and sound was of profound importance; it increased our self-awareness as a culture; it helped create a unity of response and action not previously possible; it made us more susceptible than ever to those who would mold culture and thought. In this connection it is possible to see how these developments also heightened a growing interest among social and political thinkers of the role of symbol, myth, and rhetoric. (193)

Symbol, myth, and rhetoric are, of course, the traditional domain of the fine arts. Susman argued persuasively that the dissemination of photographic and electronic media helped fuel a growing awareness of "American culture," in its anthropological sense, as a distinct way of living. But the new technologies of sight and sound fed an equally broad interest in "culture" in its more elite sense—in the aesthetic tradition that carried knowledge of the human passions and spirit. The work of social and political thinkers—studies including John Dewey's Art as Experience and Kenneth Burke's Philosophy of Literary Form, for example—contributed unquestionably to this trend. But Time Inc.'s picture magazine once again offers a more telling example, in the form of a self-congratulatory

announcement published in 1939. In Life's first three years of existence, the publisher claimed, the magazine had printed more full-color reproductions of fine art paintings "from the previous seven centuries" than any other general interest magazine. "LIFE finds the American people warmly receptive to its interpretations of outstanding work from the world of art," the magazine declared, and Life claimed even greater authority within the sphere of American painting: "No other magazine has ever done so much to introduce Americans to the vigor and beauty of their own contemporary art" ("We Think" 133). Life's discovery of a mass market for fine art reproductions represented one facet of a significant shift in the composition and scope of Americans' interest in the arts. As Rita Barnard has argued in The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance, in the 1930s high culture itself became a prestige commodity offered for wide-scale consumption, creating in the process huge new audiences for the pictorial arts, literature, and symphonic music (6).

Among other effects, these new audiences posed a radical challenge to the categorical boundaries which, it was often claimed, had defined high art practice since the nineteenth-century advent of modernism. Although diverse in emphasis, effect, and theoretical rigor, the thirties-era work of cultural critics including Adorno and Horkheimer, Clement Greenberg, and the New York Intellectuals shared an insistence on a fixed, categorical distinction of high art and mass culture. Rather than as a refutation of the trends evident in Life, however, this criticism should be read as a symptomatic reaction against the sudden, de facto power of this new cultural dispensation. These critics' passionate condemnations of kitsch and other "middle-brow" appropriations of art attained broad currency only in the years following World War II; their influence in the

1930s was limited. This later re-sealing of the mass-cultural/modernist dichotomy, however, should not obscure what Depression-era American culture clearly demonstrates: that these boundaries are, in fact, singularly fluid—shifting, disintegrating, and reforming in complex relationships with changing social conditions.

As a result, Andreas Huyssen's recent historicization of the "great divide" separating modern art and mass culture—his articulation of a dialectical and historically changing set of relationships within what is often treated as a categorical distinction—may serve as an intellectual plateau from which to view American culture during the 1930s. Theories of a permanent and necessary divide, Huyssen argued, saw two periods of greatest influence: first, in the decades before and immediately after the turn of the twentieth century; and second, in the two decades following World War II (viii). This rough periodization underscores the gap manifest in the decades between the world wars—two decades marked by similarly complex and anomalous relationships between mass culture and high art.

As a result, the lively disputes that accompanied the rise of photographic culture—disputes encompassing the modernism/mass culture nexus as well as the broader connections of culture, history, and human subjectivity—offer much that can illuminate similar tensions within our contemporary moment. Just as the decline of "great divide" theories rendered the distinctiveness of 1930s cultural praxis once again visible, so too may the texts of the 1930s help to illuminate more contemporary relationships between the art and mass culture now called postmodern. As a convenient bridge between the 1930s and our own era, then, I will turn to a later incarnation of Frankfurt School

theory—Fredric Jameson's 1984 essay "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism"—and to what is among the century's most influential readings of a work of art.<sup>6</sup>

In a now well-known critical gesture, Jameson's essay presented Andy Warhol's silkscreen Diamond Dust Shoes as an emblematic vision of postmodernity itself, an image manifesting "a new kind of flatness and depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" which distinguished the cultural products of modernity's aftermath (9). As herald of the postmodern, Jameson argued that Diamond Dust Shoes dissolved both material object and human subject: its spectral, x-ray images of women's "shoes" appeared permanently disembodied, "a random collection of dead objects" shorn of any lived context (8). Modernism's well-known crisis of representation faded into a blank, affectless surface, and the earlier era's more coherent image of subjectivity likewise fragmented. More particularly, the serial process of silkscreen reproduction effaced the hand of the artist, causing the sign "Andy Warhol" to function more as a brand name than as a marker of graphic authenticity. Similarly, the image's deadpan, scattered anonymity refused any stable position to the viewing subject. Hanging blankly in museum or gallery, it confronted patrons "with all the contingency of an inexplicable natural object" (8).

Jameson's essay was most important as a provocation, and many of its more sweeping claims demand elaboration and caveat. Most of the characteristics of Diamond

---

<sup>6</sup> I refer below to a slightly revised version of this essay that appeared as the opening chapter of Jameson's 1991 book by the same name.

Dust Shoes that the essay identified as postmodern, for example, were quite evident in the work of canonized modernists like Marcel Duchamp. Despite its magisterial sweep, however, both the "Postmodernism" essay's pretexts and its rhetorical form offer much that can illuminate the concerns of my dissertation. Among Jameson's main objectives, for example, was an intervention into a contest of meaning that began in the middle 1930s.

Although Jameson only obliquely acknowledged this critical dispute, its terms in fact prompted the essay's central trope: to mark the past from which postmodernism had broken, Jameson counterpoised Diamond Dust Shoes against a canonical work of high modernism, the oil painting A Pair of Boots by Vincent van Gogh.<sup>7</sup> As I will demonstrate in chapter 3, van Gogh emerged in 1930s America as the most celebrated artist of the European tradition; the images of van Gogh that Jameson brings into view are largely the creations of that decade. In contrast to the depthless abstractions on Warhol's silkscreen, for example, van Gogh's shoes manifested the signs of hard use. Posed and isolated, framed as the painting's sole objects, they presented themselves in seeming anticipation of the painting's viewers. In short, both the represented shoes and their pictorial treatment addressed a lived object world and a human subject, in direct contrast to the pictorial economy of Diamond Dust Shoes.

In the months around the turn of 1935-36, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger presented an influential reading of van Gogh's A Pair of Shoes (F 255) that

---

<sup>7</sup> This painting is indexed as F 333 in The Works of Vincent van Gogh, the catalogue raisonné by J.-B. de la Faille. In what follows, first references to other works by van Gogh include parenthetical citations of this catalogue.

stressed precisely these particulars. In a series of lectures eventually published as "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger drew on van Gogh's painting in order to link the aesthetic object to the grounded world of agricultural and craft labor. Heidegger's elaboration of the essential realities pervading A Pair of Shoes—"the dampness and richness of the soil," "the wordless joy of having once more withstood want," "the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of ripening grain"—located the artwork's essential reality among the folk that Terry Eagleton has called Heidegger's "ontologically correct peasantry" (Heidegger 34; Eagleton 309). In the process, Heidegger connected his argument to an aesthetic/political tradition with a renewed and powerful resonance in the 1930s. His lyrical passage offered a potent wish image, a figure of dreamed reconciliation between humanity and the natural world.

Heidegger's evocative passage also represented, according to one of Jameson's key pretexts, a "ridiculous and lamentable" lapse that fell behind the Origin essay's central insights (Derrida 292). In his 1978 essay "Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing," the French philosopher Jacques Derrida argued that Heidegger's text effectively deconstructed any such appeal to ontological stability, demonstrating that the painting's "empty, unused" shoes in their "undefined space" could reveal nothing about their location, origin, attribution, or essential being (Heidegger 33; Derrida 338). Heidegger's attempt to return A Pair of Shoes to some primeval peasant world was, Derrida argued, symptomatic. The evocation of the earthy realities pervading A Pair of Shoes became a ghost story, as Heidegger attempted to conjure a phantom human subject from behind or underneath A Pair of Shoes's painted surface.

We should read Jameson's pairing of van Gogh with Warhol, then, as an attempt to locate Heidegger's contradictory, 1935-36 essay on both sides of the historical divide separating modernism from postmodernism. Jameson's juxtaposition framed Heidegger's lyrical passage as a final gesture toward a heroic modernism; aligned against Warhol's blank silkscreen, Heidegger's linkages of A Pair of Shoes to a world of pure, earthy essence became a reaction to his intimations of postmodernity's semiotic free fall. Brought into this new constellation, in other words, Diamond Dust Shoes historicized the hesitations and interruptions that Derrida had discovered within the Origin essay: Heidegger-as-peasant, in solidarity with van Gogh, confronted Heidegger-as-deconstructionist, aligned with Warhol.

Yet there is another sense in which Diamond Dust Shoes is exemplary of postmodernism, and in this sense as well, thirties interpretations of Vincent van Gogh represent telling precursors. As Jameson notes, Diamond Dust Shoes's visual effect depended on the commodification of the image, and in particular on the iconography and rhetoric of advertising (8-9). This blurring of high art and mass culture was, of course, a hallmark of Warhol's oeuvre, and it represented one of Pop Art's central challenges to the institutionalized modernism of the late forties and 1950s. And it was precisely this same boundary—separating a degraded and commercialized mass culture from an austere and rigorous modernism—that was shattered by the unprecedented mythographic explosion surrounding van Gogh in 1930s America. Jameson's juxtaposition helps clarify the stakes involved in this cultural event: Diamond Dust Shoes once again becomes a lens through which we may discover the contradictory forces already at play within thirties valuations of van Gogh's art.



In the same span of months that Heidegger began lecturing on A Pair of Shoes in Freiburg and Zürich, a mass-cultural and commercial frenzy broke out around van Gogh's work in the United States. This phenomenon's origins may be traced to two events: the 1934 publication of Irving Stone's fictionalized biography Lust for Life, and the 1935 opening of a traveling exhibition, organized by New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), of 127 drawings and paintings by the artist. At the beginning of the decade, van Gogh had enjoyed a small reputation within U.S. art circles as an interesting eccentric; his work was seen as a useful contrast to the restraint and classical equilibrium of contemporaries like Gauguin and Cezanne (Benson 7). When the MOMA show opened in November 1935, only six American museums, and no museum in New York City, owned a van Gogh canvas (Barr 47). When the show closed fourteen months later, it stood as the most successful one-man exhibition in U.S. art history. More than 900,000 Americans attended the exhibition, and millions more saw reproductions in storefronts and national advertisements, in the pictorial sections of daily newspapers, in the new weekly picture magazines, and in illustrated editions of Lust for Life and other books. By 1937, in other words, van Gogh's unique status as an icon bridging high art and mass culture was already well established.

Like Heidegger's reading of A Pair of Shoes, the American fascination with van Gogh demonstrated a divided and contradictory structure. The poles organizing this contradiction, however, were not those of a historical divide separating modernity and postmodernity. Instead, they would be better figured as an unstable oscillation between materialism and idealism. Thirties America celebrated van Gogh both as a man of the earth—humble, self-sacrificing, and uniquely attuned to the agricultural and provincial

worlds he portrayed—and, simultaneously, as an exemplary figure of "modern culture," a hazy concept aligned with the urban sophistication of institutions like New York's Museum of Modern Art and Sak's Fifth Avenue. Van Gogh simultaneously signified the bare purity of a mythic past and a dazzling riot of color, resonant with the vitality of a redeemed modernity. Both poles of this dichotomy exerted a magnetic attraction in Depression-era America; their combination in a single artist's oeuvre located van Gogh at the center of a developing national mythology. As I demonstrate in chapter 3, this divided reading—which blurred and complicated the polar oppositions of past and future, materialism and idealism—was fundamental to the "van Gogh phenomenon" sketched above. Moreover, it depended on the montage rhetoric of the new, photographic media through which it traveled, coalescing into a persuasive form that counterpoised alternatives without resolving their logical disjunction.

At stake here, I will stress, is not any simple reflection theory that reads cultural developments as the determinate effects of changes within a political-economic base. Instead, I strive throughout to reveal the contingent and uneven pathways that connected strands of cultural praxis—materialism and idealism, for example, and modernism and mass culture—at particular moments within their histories. To accomplish this more concrete task, I develop theories of these relationships in close proximity to the texts that the theory would illuminate. Such an approach can demonstrate, for example, that the documentary movement of the middle 1930s and the concurrent, mass-media celebration of Vincent van Gogh inflected one another—changing, in the process, American understandings of both politics and art. Because similar relationships coalesced within multiple aspects of the period's new photographic media, my examinations of mass

cultural texts illuminate the work of several modern artists important to the decade: the photographers Margaret Bourke-White and Walker Evans, the painters Vincent van Gogh and Max Ernst, and the authors James Agee and William Faulkner. In short, this twin focus on both mass culture and modernist art is crucial to a clear understanding of the effects of photographic culture in its Depression-era manifestations.

The chapters that follow bring to light a number of texts that demonstrate the increasing ability of photographic culture to organize and sustain such encounters. Borrowing a page from Jameson, I will suggest that the arguments of chapters 2 through 4 each may be grasped as an exegesis of a single "shoe picture." Each of these images was intended for distribution within the photographic mass media, yet each drew on the iconography and rhetoric of modernist aesthetics. As a result, these three images—a corporate publicity shot, a documentary photograph, and a magazine illustration—manifest in different ways the central role played by aesthetics within the era's interrogations of culture and human subjectivity.

The argument of chapter 2, titled "Aesthetics, Subjectivity, and Fortune's Women," may be summarized with reference to a photograph and caption that appeared in Time Inc.'s three-year-old business magazine. In conjunction with an article on the International Shoe company, in 1933 Fortune published a photograph of shoe-making machinery accompanied by the caption, "Shoes without Soles: A Study in Expression." While sole-less shoes were discernible within the image, artistic "expression" in its traditional sense was not. The photograph presented Fortune's readers with a close-up of leather shoe-uppers moving in bunches through some concealed process of manufacture. Resembling the work of German "New Objectivity" photographers like Hans Finsler and

Albert Renger-Patzsch, the image exploited the multiplied and regular forms of mass-produced commodities in order to create a rhythmic array of pattern and line. As was characteristic of this machine-aesthetic modernism, the image isolated these forms without reference to the picture plane or larger context. This disorienting, formalist approach to photographic representation became the signature of Fortune in the thirties, as the self-styled "Most Beautiful Magazine in America" increasingly turned to modernist photography in its attempt to create a magazine with "a distinction and beauty to match the superlative importance of Modern Business" (Time Inc., "Fortune" 45). Fortune's interest in aesthetics in general and modernism in particular offers an instructive puzzle, since the magazine applied these approaches to fields like banking, meat-packing, and mining—phenomena that are rarely associated with art. At stake was Fortune's reconception of the role of the individual within the spaces of corporate capitalism. Like Heidegger, Fortune turned to aesthetics in reaction to a crisis of individualist ideology. Unlike Heidegger, however, Fortune envisioned a new historical subject—the multinational corporation—with literally inhuman powers.

Chapter 3, "Vincent van Gogh, Walker Evans, and the Utility of Modern Art," returns to the mass-cultural embrace of van Gogh sketched above in order to highlight this phenomenon's influence on documentary photography in general and on Walker Evans in particular. Evans's photograph of "Floyd Burroughs' Work Boots," made in 1936, echoes the motif of several paintings made by van Gogh between 1886 and 1888, including A Pair of Shoes and A Pair of Boots, considered by Heidegger and Jameson, and Still Life: A Pair of Shoes (F 461), included in the MOMA exhibition. Like van Gogh's shoe paintings, Evans's photograph presented a pair of well-worn shoes within a

flat, horizontal plane. A number of further parallels connected the images' angles of vision and treatment, and several discussions of Evans's Depression-era photography have noted this explicit citation of van Gogh. Critics have neglected, however, Evans's larger debt to the van Gogh phenomenon—evident both in his photographic practice and in its reception. In fact, the visual parallels that are conspicuous in "Floyd Burroughs' Work Boots" are apparent throughout Evans's documentary portrait of Southern agriculture. Bringing this extensive influence to light, chapter 3 underscores the dependence of thirties documentary on pictorial modernism in general. High art provided a constant subtext to the thirties documentary movement, and—as is clear in "Floyd Burroughs Work Boots"—the relationship rarely involved a simple renunciation of art.

As chapter 4's title, "Realism, Surrealism, and Advertising: William Faulkner and Life Magazine," is meant to suggest, the avant garde movement of Surrealism emerged in the late 1930s as an important middle term bridging two of the era's most pervasive and influential discursive systems. Surrealism's impact on the period's sense of itself is apparent in a photo-montage published by Fortune seven years after "Shoes Without Soles"—an illustration titled "Call it an American 'Dream of Venus.'" In juxtaposition, the two images offer a striking vision of cultural mutation, emphasizing the decline of ideologies structured by industrial production and the concomitant rise of consumerism. Unlike the machinelike rhythm and symmetry of the earlier photograph, the American "Dream of Venus" pictured the cultural terrain of the future as a sexualized, disorderly, and dangerous flux. Commissioned for an article titled "Plastics in 1940," the American "Dream of Venus" included dozens of scattered, brightly colored plastic forms (including a single, transparent high-heeled shoe). These new synthetics were presented as the wave

of a fluid and chaotic future, and the montage borrowed from the tropes of Surrealism to chart this new terrain: "Dentures, doorknobs, gears, goggles, juke-boxes, crystal chairs, transparent shoes and ladies rise up from the plastic sea. Only surrealism's derangements can capture the limitless horizons, strange juxtapositions, endless products of this new world in process of becoming" (89). In other words, Fortune drew on surrealism's "derangements" to embody the strangely fluid instabilities demonstrated by these modern materials—and, through synecdoche, by modernity as a whole.

Chapter 5 diverges from this shoe motif in order to offer an afterword, called "Walter Benjamin Comes to Life." As an end to the present study and an opening onto future work, the afterword locates the origins of the "dialectical image," Walter Benjamin's central theoretical tool, within the photographic medium that I call the picture magazine and that Benjamin called the illustrierte Zeitung. Benjamin's conception of the dialectical image was overdetermined, but its key elements demonstrate a necessary relationship to the weekly pictorial magazines that decisively shaped the milieu of Benjamin's intellectual maturity. Many of the dialectical image's key attributes, for example—its ephemerality, its blending of pictorial and verbal systems of representation, its montage of fragments torn from their historical contexts, and its dependence of shock—find their most compelling material embodiment in the picture magazine.

The afterword suggests, then, that the illustrierte Zeitungen's relationships to Benjamin's dialectical image run both ways: just as the picture magazines were integral to the formulation of Benjamin's theory, so too is the dialectical image necessary to an understanding of the era's photographic culture and its effects on perception and consciousness. Uncovering these relationships remains a vital critical task, since the

legacies of these inter-war developments continue to shape contemporary American culture.

To illuminate this final point, I will return once more to Jameson's "Postmodernism" essay, which displayed a profound debt to Benjamin both in its content and its form. What Jameson called the "fundamental mutation" that marked the transition to postmodernism, for example, was quite close to the historical break articulated in the Artwork essay. Here Benjamin positioned the modern dissolution of "aura" in a dialectical relationship to the development of photography.<sup>8</sup> Jameson made the similar point in reference to Warhol's Diamond Dust Shoes, arguing that the silkscreen's picture plane revealed the object-world itself as simulacra, "as though the external and coloured surface of things—debased and contaminated in advance by their assimilation to glossy advertising images—has been stripped away to reveal the deathly black-and-white substratum of the photographic negative which subtends them" (9). The reference to Benjamin's Artwork essay is clear, connecting the seriality of the silkscreen and photographic processes to a more fundamental, historical mutation "both in the object world itself...and in the disposition of the subject" (Jameson 9; cf. Benjamin, Illuminations 222-24).

But it is the form of Jameson's essay that demonstrates its greatest debt to Benjamin, and it is also this rhetorical structure that underlies my investigation of thirties-era culture. Jameson's abrupt juxtaposition of van Gogh and Warhol—displaced from

---

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin's understanding of the decline of "aura" is perhaps best understood as the decaying ability of human subjects to register uniqueness and permanence as inherent qualities of material objects (cf. Illuminations 221-23).

their original contexts and re-figured as a "dramatic shorthand parable" of historical change—approximates the political/aesthetic form that Benjamin articulated as the dialectical image (Jameson 11). The pairing also demonstrates the continuing cognitive and political power of such montage logic, which first came to prominence in America during the Great Depression. If for no other reason than for the light it sheds on such compelling forms of visual rhetoric, the photographic culture of the American thirties repays our careful attention.



## CHAPTER 2

### AESTHETICS, SUBJECTIVITY, AND FORTUNE'S WOMEN

Seventy years after its launch, the irony of Fortune's success remains striking. It is, indeed, difficult to imagine a better recipe for failure. In early 1929, at the peak of a decade-long economic expansion, Time Inc. conceived of a new kind of business journalism—an expensive, elegant monthly magazine that would celebrate the grandeur and dignity of the American free enterprise system. Although Time Warner continues to publish a business magazine with the same name, today's Fortune shares little resemblance with the ornate journal of the thirties. Fortune's first issue appeared in February 1930, three months after the stock market crash that signaled the onset of the Great Depression—a decade-long disaster that would impoverish millions of Americans and humiliate the country's business elite. In a 1937 article published by The Nation, Dwight Macdonald observed that as a result of this timing Fortune developed "a bad case of schizophrenia" (528). During its first seven years of publication, Macdonald noted, the business magazine consistently occupied the left wing among Time Inc.'s roster of publications, largely because of its staff writers: "Fortune breeds liberals, perhaps through the workings of the dialectical principle" (528). Macdonald's tone was light, but Fortune's many anomalies supported his observations. Although it was edited for and read by the nation's wealthiest businessmen, Fortune's important 1932 article "No One Has Starved...which is not true" broke a widespread media silence concerning the

Depression's severity.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the decade Fortune cultivated an elegant and genteel image, yet its "Life and Circumstances" series of the middle thirties heavily influenced documentary books including You Have Seen Their Faces, Land of the Free, and Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.<sup>2</sup> In its first years of existence, Macdonald claimed, Fortune was "a social phenomenon as bristling with contradictions as the capitalist system for which it speaks" (527). Macdonald was essentially correct, although in ways that he might not have recognized.

Fortune expressed the larger society's contradictions by troubling three dichotomies inherited from the ideologies of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, which privileged the first term of each opposition: individualism versus collectivity, production versus consumption, and masculinity versus femininity. In sum, I will argue that Fortune turned to aesthetics in its verbal and visual representations of American business—the oddest quirk in a very quirky magazine—as a means to reverse the hierarchies of the first two pairings. Reacting both to the rise of corporate capitalism and to the disaster of the Depression, in other words, Fortune used art to envision a future redeemed by corporate authority and consumerist consumption. In doing so, the magazine

---

<sup>1</sup> A 1932 survey revealed that 60 percent of Fortune's readers worked as corporate officers, partners, or major executives. The average subscriber earned more than \$21,000 a year, and 30 to 40 percent were on the social register (Baughman 74). On the media blackout, see Stott (67-73; 78-80).

<sup>2</sup> Articles in the "Life and Circumstances" mode include portraits of a railroad porter (July 1930), a mail room worker (April 1934), a family farm in Illinois (Aug. 1935), an auto worker at Plymouth (Dec. 1935), a family on relief (Feb. 1936), a "white-collar man" (May 1936), a family of sharecroppers (March 1937), a naval officer (March 1938), an agricultural county agent (July 1938), a railroad fireman (June 1939), a Manhattan cab

reconfigured the older dichotomy of masculinity and femininity, shoring up the primacy of masculine subject positions, but doing so in a way that recast what it meant to be a (business)man.

This summary statement of effects, however, flattens much that was uneven and contradictory in Fortune. In a memoir written years later, one former Fortune staff writer revealed his major discovery while at the magazine: "It was suddenly borne home to me that business was a great tissue of cross-purposes" (Chamberlain 33). So was Fortune, and its ideological effects depended on what I called, in chapter 1, montage logic: the juxtaposition of incommensurate images in ways that combined meanings while at the same time maintaining their disjunction. Outside of film, such structures were most readily apparent in the literary and artistic devices of allegory and metaphor. It was these structures, more than any simple attempt to cover over the truths of capitalist exploitation, that motivated Fortune's turn to art.

As a new magazine of business, Fortune distinguished itself from the outset through its promotion of aesthetics. Its first issue, for example, carried an article on "Color in Industry" that emphasized manufacturers' growing need to take account of the dictates of fashion and modern design. Fortune continued to make similar points in articles throughout the decade, but the magazine's most distinctive application of aesthetics proved to be its integration of literary and artistic motifs into its own self-presentation. One of the magazine's earliest conceptions—the prospectus that Luce submitted to Time Inc.'s Board of Directors—asserted that Fortune "will be as beautiful a

---

driver (July 1939), and a plumber (March 1940). On the series' influence, see Stott (211-12; 261-62).

magazine as exists in the United States. If possible, the undisputed most beautiful" (Elson 130). Time Inc. made a concerted effort to accomplish this task, and Fortune took shape as an ornate, expensive, and sizable magazine. The new magazine was printed in large format (11 1/4x14 inches), on expensive, parchment-like paper, with heavy card-stock covers and hand-sewn bindings. The resulting monthly issues often weighed three to four pounds, and throughout the 1930s Fortune sold for the premium price of a dollar an issue. The magazine itself, in other words, became a finely crafted, status-enhancing, luxury commodity.

Editorially, the magazine aspired to a similar brilliance. Time Inc.'s promotional campaign for the new magazine called industrial society the greatest achievement of Western civilization. This "largest of the planets" therefore deserved a new kind of writing: a "literature about business" that reflected the splendor of modern industry (Time Inc. "Boomerang" 139). Fortune's choices of staff writers suggest that this claim was more than advertising hyperbole. Through a special arrangement with Luce, for example, the Pulitzer Prize winning poet Archibald MacLeish headed Fortune's writing staff during its first nine years (MacLeish 10). Early staff writers included two other published poets, James Agee and Russell Davenport, and many of the magazine's other writers shared similar literary ambitions (Bell 5). In fact, Time Inc.'s executives consistently foregrounded Fortune's literary qualities, as the advertisement cited above indicates. In a frequently reproduced quote, Luce claimed, "Of necessity, we made the discovery that it is easier to turn poets into business journalists than to turn bookkeepers into writers" (Elson 137). Fortune combined this emphasis on elegant style with a strict policy of anonymity. Its photographers and visual artists received bylines, but the vast majority of

articles were unsigned. The intended effect was a unified, authoritative journalistic voice that simultaneously carried the markers of cultivation and refinement.

For cultural historians, then, Fortune poses intriguing questions. First, what combination of historical circumstances made this business magazine's priorities the creation of both a new "literature" and "the undisputed most beautiful magazine in the United States"? Second, why would such a magazine thrive during the social and cultural crises that defined the Great Depression? As John Tagg argued in a study of documentary photography, the thirties were a moment of crisis, "not only of social and economic relations and social identities but, crucially, of representation itself: of the means of making the sense we call social experience" (8). Fortune's influential, aesthetic approach to business journalism suggests that documentary realism was only one among several means of making sense in the 1930s.

In fact, by taking Fortune's claims seriously—by reading this magazine as a new kind of literature—we gain a better understanding of the constellation of social and representational crises that shaped the decade. To demonstrate this thesis, we need only examine the narrative structure of the "corporation story," the journalistic innovation that represented Fortune's most influential contribution to the literature of business (Elson 128; Chamberlain 27). Corporation stories were generally heroic tales of birth, development, and maturity, adventures sought, and challenges met. In this new kind of narrative, however, the central character became the incorporate organization itself, rather than its human founders, executives, or workers. Parker Lloyd-Smith of Time Inc.'s Experimental Department wrote the first corporation story in 1929 to test the proposed magazine's viability. The lengthy article that resulted convinced Lloyd-Smith, soon

Fortune's first managing editor, that the form's novelty and power could carry the magazine: "There is no real competition," Lloyd-Smith wrote to Luce. "Established business magazines will not or cannot handle stories as we think they should be handled" (Elson 128). For the next ten years (and more), corporation stories formed the heart of Fortune's journalistic corpus; the magazine published an average of two each month, along with a similar profile of an entire industry rather than a single corporation (Lydgate 19). As a result, Fortune's accumulating issues gradually rendered the image of a world populated by titans: gigantic beings like AT&T, Standard Oil, RCA, and Sears Roebuck emerged as the agents of a new world order, and, as a result, of a new world history.

In the corporation story, Fortune rejected the more traditional focus on great men—an Andrew Carnegie or Henry Ford, for example—found in older journals like Nation's Business (Elson 129). Instead, Fortune told the stories of great corporations like U.S. Steel or Ford Motors. No longer the expression of any particular individual, the corporation-as-hero emerged within Fortune's pages as the true engine of history. This shift manifests far more, I will stress, than simply a different angle or emphasis. It indicated instead a transformation within basic concepts used to organize and understand social and historical development. Fortune told a new kind of story, and in doing so it encouraged its readers to see themselves as cogs rather than kings.

Of course, in the 1930s Fortune was hardly alone in privileging the authority of collective historical agents. A variety of similar entities competed during these years to claim the old sovereignty of the nineteenth-century humanist subject. The Soviet Party, the Nazi Reich, and the New Deal Agency embodied similar responses to this constellation of social forces—each was a collective agent whose perspective and

authority dwarfed human scale, and each challenged the older ideology of individualist autonomy. Fortune's corporation story presented, in other words, a forceful response to the political and social turmoil of the Depression era. Furthermore, as a narrative reaction to the radical social and economic transformations of its age, the corporation story also closely paralleled a defining motif of modernist literature and philosophy.

As Terry Eagleton observed in his Ideology of the Aesthetic, the modern epoch "witnesses a turning away on all sides from the traditional philosophy of the subject of Kant, Hegel and the younger Marx, troubledly conscious as it is of the individual as constituted to its roots by forces and processes utterly opaque to everyday consciousness" (316-17). This reaction provoked a return of "mythological thinking"—a tendency evident in moderns from Marx to Freud to Heidegger and de Saussure, as well from Faulkner to Joyce to Yeats and Woolf—that was intricately related to the developing structures of global capitalism:

For it is no longer possible to pretend, given the transitions from market to monopoly capitalism, that the old vigorously individualist ego, the self-determining subject of classical liberal thought, is any longer an adequate model for the subject's new experience of itself under these altered social conditions. The modern subject, much like the mythological one, is less the sharply individuated source of its own actions than an obedient function of some deeper controlling structure, which now appears more and more to do its thinking and acting for it. (Eagleton 316)

Eagleton's connection of literary modernism to monopoly capitalism finds direct expression in Fortune's "literature of business." Both modern literature and Fortune reacted to a crisis of historical agency, which deepened as the Great Depression underscored the human subject's prostration before implacable, inscrutable powers. Fortune drew on literary style, in other words, because the literature of its time reflected

the intimate linkages connecting modernity, monopoly capitalism, and the resurgence of world-views characteristic of classical mythology.

Closely parallel to the modernist interrogation of individualism that Eagleton identified in Freud, Heidegger, de Saussure, and the later Marx, for example, was an (unsigned) article in Fortune's first issue written by Luce himself, which promoted deregulation and mergers within the banking industry:

The Machine has despatched [sic] us, with our almost unanimous consent, upon an adventure in consolidation and organization. The hypochondriac among us may have unusually good reason to count the pulse and take the temperature of his Individualism. The rest of us are not easily, perhaps not easily enough, alarmed. On the whole, we like extraordinarily well the huge neighborhood into which our lives are cast. Most of us do business with, or are even employed by, "neighbors" we never see through agencies we cannot comprehend. ("Banking" 180)

Embodying this Machine, in this same issue, was the first of hundreds of corporation stories that Fortune would publish in the following decades—the lead article of its inaugural issue, a profile of the Swift & Company meatpackers. In its third paragraph, the story offered an image of corporation-as-protagonist worthy of any classical myth:

[T]he packer has gradually created one of the largest industries in America. Standing astride the Mississippi, he reaches with his right hand into the great agricultural states, producing two-thirds of all U.S. livestock, and with his left hand hurls \$3,000,000,000 worth of steaks and chops and hams toward the huge population centers of the East. ("Tsa-a" 55)

Parker-Smith, himself a student of classics at Princeton, also wrote this first article (Elson 127; 141-42). It set the mode for Fortune's distinctive approach to modern business, but it did not solve the ideological riddles that this retreat from individualism posed. The mythic structure of the corporation story did, however, offer Fortune's readers



a narrative solution to the ideological crisis of the Great Depression: identification with a (masculine) corporation, presented in a ongoing pas de deux with a (feminine) consumer. The lynchpin of this system, in other words, lay in its figurations of gender. An extended passage taken from a later corporation story, a 1933 profile of the International Shoe Company, will help to clarify this point. In the opening paragraphs of this story on the world's largest manufacturer of shoes, Fortune endowed corporations in general with a bizarre array of subjective attributes:

It does not take a lawyer to persuade the average citizen of this republic that corporations have individualities of their own. Law students may sweat over the question of the corporate entity and pose themselves such conundrums as whether or not a corporation organized for the purchase and sale of dry groceries can commit a rape. But the reader of investors' columns doesn't need to be told....And the poem which reports that

"The Oklahoma Ligno & Lithograph Co.  
Weeps at a nude by Michael Angelo"

would leave him skeptical but not scandalized. Stranger things have happened.

It is, certainly, a curious fact that a conglomerate of twenty or thirty thousand men, a few hundred thousand tons of raw materials, ten square miles of plant, and a bank balance as big as the monetary gold supply of a South American republic should have a personality of its own. But a fact nonetheless. And the personality is not merely a personality of statistics. ("Southern Accent" 71)

In the 1990s, the phenomena that Fortune defined here as "personality" were generally grouped under the concept of "corporate culture": the differing folkways, distribution paths, and hierarchies of value that result in distinct cultures within different organizations. In contrast to the network paradigms that dominated this later era, however, in the 1930s Fortune fashioned entities that were corporeal, animate, and

autonomous. The material subject called International Shoe, for example, combined men, machinery, raw material, real estate, and money. The corporation produced 45 million pairs of shoes in 1931, and in doing so it conglomerated thousands of human minds and points of view, hands of rubber and steel as well as flesh, 48 factories and seven million head of livestock, millions of dollars in capital, global channels of supply and distribution, and—quite strangely, Fortune stressed—both "character" and "personality."

"[I]f you wish to understand International Shoe," the article claimed, "you must read not the company's balance sheets but the journal of Mark Twain. For the key to the corporation as a corporation is to be found not in its annual statements but in the Deep South" (71). International Shoe's personality was distinctively Southern, Fortune explained, because it was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in the 1870s. Its character was formed by the miseries of Reconstruction: "International has character. People brought up in hard times generally have character—unless they die beforehand" (74). This character—manifest in the fact that International Shoe was solely and completely "a manufacturing company run by manufacturers for the purpose of manufacturing"—allowed the corporation to thrive during the current hard times (74).

As these examples suggest, the defining structure of Fortune's corporation story was literary; its effectiveness depended on the persuasiveness of its storyline and its metaphors. The vivid strangeness of this 1933 personification of International Shoe, therefore, poses an obvious question: what did Fortune accomplish by framing the corporation as an entity with character and personality, as an organism that could rape and weep? The crux of an answer lies, I believe, within the intense, and polar, gendering of these final two actions. Rape is, of course, violently masculine, while weeping before a

Michelangelo is a stereotypically feminine act. In its profoundly conflicted, elliptical manner, Fortune suggested that successful corporations must be both brutally masculine and, simultaneously, feminine in their aesthetic sensibility and passions. And, to the extent that Fortune's readers identified with these new heroes, they adopted a similarly schizophrenic guise.

Fortune argued that International Shoe company succeeded, for example, because it marshaled its enormous powers of oversight and organization to respond to the dictates of fashion. Until the 1920s, Fortune wrote, the cosmopolitan mode had been of little concern to International Shoe.

But the automobile, the short skirt, and the magazines changed all that. Women's feet came out from under their skirts. Paris styles circulated in eloquent advertisements in Indiana, and any farmer's wife could get up to the county seat by car for a Saturday evening's shopping. The result was the style epidemic which swept the country after the War. (84)

In this new terrain, International Shoe's success depended on the whims of a singularly modern and capricious figure—"the young lady in the smart fur coat looking through the Fifth Avenue windows"—the woman whose impulses turned the wheels of fashion (84). Like many of Fortune's heroes, International Shoe reacted to this woman's whims with military precision and planning. The company's most remarkable achievement, according to Fortune, lay in its ability to translate New York fashions into mass-produced commodities with a three-month turnaround:

To route materials through forty-eight specialized factories when those materials must change in process from raw hides just off the steer to fashionable shoes ready for the foot is a problem which Napoleon's general staff would have avoided with eagerness. International's success in solving the problem indicates that the company has not developed character at the cost of brains. (84)

As its portrait of International Shoe begins to suggest, Fortune's "literature of business" combined a veneration of the Machine with a privileging of consumption, rather than production, as the engine of the modern economy. Luce's 1929 prospectus, for example, asserted in grand terms the centrality of the new consumer economy: "The 20th Century trend in merchandising, the growth of the chain store system, is no less significant in the century's development than the decline of the theory of states' rights" (Elson 129). As the Depression deepened, the massive productive capacity of U.S. industry seemed more and more dependant on figures like "the young lady in the smart fur coat." Reacting to a growing understanding of the Depression as a crisis of consumption, Fortune inscribed the social anxieties of its age and, more particularly, its readership within extravagantly artful texts that placed women at the center of modern life. Given both the complexity and the importance of such images, however, further investigation of "Fortune's women" will first require a more precise definition.

Time Inc.'s contribution to the gendering of business within its own industry, American publishing, was neatly summarized in 1968 by Gloria Steinem, founder and publisher of Ms.: "The rule Henry Luce invented 30 years ago still applies...women research, and men write" (8). Although Steinem overstated the novelty of Luce's invention, her observation suggests the enormous influence wielded by Time Inc.'s example. Despite the visibility and economic clout of titles aimed at female audiences—from Vogue to Good Housekeeping to True Confessions—American magazine publishing remained a masculine province throughout most of the twentieth century, and Luce's spectacularly successful organization helped to reinforce this fact.

Time Inc.'s researcher/writer division originated with the 1923 founding of Time, and it established the basis for the gender hierarchy at Fortune, Time Inc.'s second start-up. Fortune's executives were all male, and with few exceptions they hired men to write stories, take photographs, and sell ad space. (The photographer Margaret Bourke-White proved to be a singular exception to this rule, a point to which I will return below.) In addition, Fortune's privileged subject matter, intended audience, and its advertisers—all businesses or businessmen—combined to give Fortune an unusually male-centered point of view, even within a company and an industry dominated by men. The "women" that this chapter investigates, therefore, generally require the scare quotes: they were masculine constructions of femininity rather than real, historical women.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the Modern Woman—young, fashionable, and desirable—occupied a prominent place within Fortune throughout its first decade. Photographs of partially nude or otherwise sexualized young women, for example, made regular appearances in the 129 issues published between February 1930 and December 1940. Both Fortune's advertisers and its editorial staff often seemed eager to provide its male readers with opportunities for voyeuristic pleasure. Among the advertisers, the International Salt company proved to be one of the most creative. Its campaign to promote the use of salt in industrial applications included, for example, "Fabric Magic!": an ad which explained that "Beauty's most luxurious garments now may come from a lump of coal, a breath of air, and a pinch of SALT" (27). The company illustrated this claim with a half-page

---

<sup>3</sup> In its July, August, and September 1935 issues, Fortune did publish three articles on real "Women in Business." The subtitle of the third story—"Sixteen exceptions to prove the rule that woman's place is not the executive's chair"—suggests the series' slant (81).

photograph of a model wearing lingerie and carefully posed to reveal breast, hip, and leg. On the editorial side, the magazine's stories often included photographs that suggested Fortune was a "men's magazine" in the more contemporary sense. During ten years of Depression, Fortune managed to publish well-illustrated stories on the business of burlesque houses (February 1935) and Broadway leg shows (July 1938), on the hosiery industry (January 1932 and September 1934), on corset manufacturing (March 1938), on nude models in a tailor's shop (November 1932) and a Disney drawing class (November 1934), on salacious films (December 1938), on an Italian breast-feeding program (July 1934), on nude sunbathing (October 1932), on women's underwear (November 1932), on debutantes (December 1938), and on the American fashion industry, then cut off from occupied Paris (November 1940).

In fact, Fortune's first nude appeared on its first published page: the cover of its inaugural issue featured a bare-breasted image of the magazine's namesake, the Roman goddess Fortuna, posed with her Wheel against a backdrop of strenuously working laborers. That Fortune chose to emphasize its connection to this mythological goddess, however—particularly when combined with Fortune's other images of femininity during these years—begins to suggest that Fortune's women embodied a condensation of cultural forces that extended far beyond simple prurience. In fact, Fortune's representations of women acted as complex metaphors. Read with care, they provide a key to understanding some of this Depression-era business magazine's other complexities.

Throughout the thirties, for example, Fortune emphasized its ties to Fortuna. The magazine's monthly editorial column was titled "Fortune's Wheel," and the goddess herself continued to appear, nude and watchful, on gift subscription cards through 1934

(Time Inc. "Subscription" 189). In combination with her appearance as a sexually desirable woman, however, the trope of Fortune-as-goddess also carried a certain foreboding. Readers literate in classical mythology would know that the goddess determined men's fate, and even those without such knowledge could equate the alluring goddess with a more modern strand of anxiety running through Fortune's pages. This thread—already evident in "the young lady in the smart fur coat"—equated the stereotype of female capriciousness with the seeming irrationality of American consumers. In short, it connected a desire for mastery of modern social structures to a desire for mastery over modern women. The same inaugural issue that carried Fortuna on its cover, for example, also carried an ad from an advertising agency seeking clients among Fortune's readers. This agency announced that the aggregate American woman "controls the profits of many manufacturers. Extravagant, frugal; wise, foolish; fickle, dependable; she holds your business, in all likelihood, in the hollow of her hand" (Charles Daniel Frey 139). A pen-and-ink drawing offered readers an image of this powerful aggregate: a classically dressed woman, turned threateningly away from her suitors, with an upheld, open, pointy-fingered hand. Fortune's article on the garment industry a few months later made a similar point: "The country's fourth largest industry is at the mercy of two forces—labor and a woman's vanity. Together, they keep it without leadership and without stability" ("Cloak & Suit" 92).

According to Roland Marchand's Advertising the American Dream, a fine study of the industry from 1920 through 1940, advertising discourse of the period (as distinct from the advertisements themselves) consistently claimed that the consuming masses were emotional, irrational, and fickle in thought and action (66-69). Advertisers also

accepted as received truth the estimate that American women made at least 80 percent of purchases, and long-held gender stereotypes connected these two "facts" (Marchand 66). This gendering of modern economic structures located women's passions at society's center, and modernity in this aspect appeared both inviting and menacing. As the Depression deepened, these modern women appeared more and more like Fortuna herself, both desirable and dangerous, holding the nation's destiny in disturbingly powerful hands. In November 1938, for example, the Plaskon corporation reminded Fortune's readers that Mrs. America "can make or break you by a turn of her head" (Plaskon 111). As the solution to this dangerous situation, however, Plaskon also claimed to speak this aggregate's language: a streamlined, colorful discourse of fashionable style and modernist design. Similar imagery and rhetoric, equating women's desires and modernist style, recurred in Fortune's pages throughout the decade.

The most important of Fortune's women, however, was Margaret Bourke-White, a 25-year-old industrial photographer from Cleveland, hired in 1929 to serve as Fortune's first staff photographer. While most of Fortune's women were the fictional products of advertising or editorial fantasy, Bourke-White was both a real, historical personage and a Fortune construction. As a photographer, Bourke-White brought to Fortune a dramatic visual style that made the magazine's reputation. As a star—soon acknowledged as the world's most famous photographer—she also proved to be one of Time Inc.'s most valuable commodities.

Luce himself hired Bourke-White in 1929, based on a series of exceptional photographs that she had taken of blast furnaces at the Otis Steel Company (Bourke-White, Portrait 62-64). To complement his imagined "literature of business," Luce sought



a visual style that would both carry the authority of high art and celebrate the drama and beauty of modern business. He found both in Bourke-White's influential approach to photographic modernism, which observers soon called "the Fortune picture" (Goldberg 109). This tag referred to the magazine's version of the machine aesthetic, that broad strand of modernist practice which celebrated the hard angles and geometric form, patterning, repetition, and dynamism associated with mechanized industrial production. Often associated with the Italian avant-garde movement of Futurism, the machine aesthetic privileged the camera as the herald of mechanized civilization. In addition to Futurism, the approach also influenced the photography of the German Bauhaus and Neue Sachlichkeit [New Objectivity] movements, British Vorticism, Soviet Constructivism, and, in the United States, the f/64 group in California and East Coast Precisionists like Charles Sheeler.

In 1929, Bourke-White brought to Fortune a version of the machine aesthetic that emphasized the drama and dynamism of industrial processes. In these aspects, her approach closely resembled the heroic spectacle, disorienting points of view, and dramatic angles of Soviet Constructivism, a movement that flowered in the twenties and continued to influence Soviet culture through 1932.<sup>4</sup> Bourke-White toured the Soviet Union on Fortune assignments in 1930, 1931, and 1932, initially carrying letters of introduction from the Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (Goldberg 126). This early

---

<sup>4</sup> For an exceptional recent history of Constructivism, see the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's The Great Utopia.

exposure to Soviet photographic communities reinforced her preference for their similar approaches and styles.

With Bourke-White as its most influential exponent, then, "the Fortune picture" paralleled Constructivism in its celebration of modern industry's energy and expressive drama. Bourke-White specialized in finding beauty in the least likely places, and as a result Fortune's imagery consistently conjoined the artful and the utilitarian. One of the first examples—taken in the stock yards of the Swift & Company Meatpackers—presented vast mounds of decomposing, ground-up pork as dynamic, textured planes of intersecting light and shadow ("Pig Dust" 61). For a later industry story on coal mining, Bourke-White's careful composition and lighting revealed the flowing, rib-like curves of support struts and rail-car track in a tunnel more than a mile underground ("Tube" 81).

As was typical of "the Fortune picture," both these photographs relegated human workers to secondary importance. While Bourke-White's portraiture did sometimes present workers as the agents of industrial production (cf. her Eyes on Russia), the images preferred by Fortune emphasized the monumental size and productive capacity of modern machinery to the neglect of its human tenders. Two representative photographs, for example, accompanied the story on International Shoe. The first, titled "The Shoemaker's Last," appeared on the article's opening page (Kaufmann & Fabry 71). The photograph presented rows of wooden shoe forms, excised and multiplied into rhythmic arrays without reference to either the picture plane or human use value. Its framing cut through the pictured objects, providing little in the way of orienting surface and resisting attempts to bring the forms into representational significance. Similarly, the photograph considered in chapter 1, "Shoes without Soles: A Study in Expression," presented the

bunched and repeated S-curves of leather shoe uppers as abstract, rhythmic patterns of lines (Kaufmann & Fabry 86). Both images took an aggressively modernist stance, departing from the figurative traditions of painting in framing, appearance, and emphasis.

In their dramatic and disorienting approach to the representation of business, these four photographs offer a useful window onto the aims and effects of Fortune's modernism. Like the corporation stories that they accompanied, these photographs presented an image of modern industry suddenly free from human authority. And like the mythic protagonists of its corporate narratives, Fortune's aestheticized images of this reality reflected both a displacement of and compensation for the old primacy of the individualist subject.

The self-proclaimed "most beautiful magazine in America," Fortune's visual trademark quickly became such extraordinary photography. Headed by Margaret Bourke-White, the list of photographers appearing in Fortune included many of the decade's most celebrated names.<sup>5</sup> Fortune devoted exceptional care to its photographic reproductions, offering these artists a publishing venue unmatched since Alfred Steiglitz's Camera Work. To better approximate the tonal range and richness of a gelatin silver print, for example, Fortune printed photographs on a sheet-fed gravure press separate from the rest of the magazine. Each issue presented several photographs in a format appropriate to fine art prints: laid out singly, 6x9 inches or larger, often with triple black borders that

---

<sup>5</sup> The list included Ansel Adams, Berenice Abbott, Anton Bruehl, Robert Capa, Alfred Eisenstaedt, Walker Evans, Rex Hardy, Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Helen Levitt, Moholy-Nagy, Carl Mydans, Marion Post [Wolcott], Charles Sheeler, Eugene Smith, Aaron Siskind, Edward Steichen, Ralph Steiner, Erich Salomon, Carl Van Vechten, and Bret Weston.

resembled a mat and frame. Throughout the decade, in other words, Fortune offered its readers an education in visual modernism. The magazine proposed that Americans should discover in modern business the beauty and sublimity that previous generations had found in the fine arts.

The key to this equation of aesthetics and modern business lay in Fortune's most carefully crafted persona: the "girl photographer" Margaret Bourke-White. As the magazine's public face, Bourke-White and her camera represented the paradigm of the "young lady in the smart fur coat," that alluring and fashionable symbol of modernity whose gaze held the power to make or break corporations. Bourke-White had invented this public persona—a mixture of daring, artistry, glamour, and sex appeal—while still working as an industrial photographer in Cleveland. At Fortune she found a willing and powerful ally, and, once in New York, Bourke-White went to great lengths to align her image with both modernism and modernity. In 1930 she set up a photographic studio on the 61st floor of the new Chrysler Building (Goldberg 130). She hired a well-known interior designer to equip it in proper modernist style, and she had herself photographed while perched on the end of one of the building's signature gargoyles (Goldberg 130). Young, ambitious, and highly talented, Bourke-White embraced the opportunities for daring successes that Time Inc. offered, and she simultaneously adopted fashionable clothing, hairstyles, and a demeanor that struck most observers as both cosmopolitan and feminine (Goldberg 118-19). As the decade progressed, Bourke-White moved from one high-profile triumph to the next, consolidating her position as Time Inc.'s marquee photographer. Time Inc., for its part, did everything in its power to make Bourke-White a star. Hers was the only name to appear on the masthead page of Fortune's inaugural issue,

and early stories focused equal attention on the photographer herself. For example, the opening page of a story on German industry in Fortune's December 1930 issue included a publicity portrait of Bourke-White, and the story's lead paragraph detailed her adventures with the German police ("Germany in the Workshop" 89). Here, then, was an icon with great appeal to Fortune's Depression-era readership: a beautiful and glamorous young woman whose gaze constructed modern industry as a mighty and compelling force.

In sum, Bourke-White's aesthetic of industrial grandeur, combined with her stylishly modern persona, created a powerful synergy. Like the other glamorous young women that peopled Fortune's pages during the Great Depression, including Fortuna herself, Bourke-White embodied the exhilarating energy of modernity. Through such women, Fortune's pages linked the motifs of modernist art to those of libidinal desire, creating a leitmotif that located feminine passions at the center of the modern economy. Furthermore, in their new centrality and in their passions, these icons themselves suggested that the inhumanly grand protagonists of monopoly capital, including corporate media like Fortune, offered vital service as the controls and channels of these modern consumers.

### CHAPTER 3

#### VINCENT VAN GOGH, WALKER EVANS, AND THE UTILITY OF MODERN ART

In September 1935, the American photographer Walker Evans took a permanent position with the agency that would become the U.S. Farm Security Administration (FSA). Two months later, New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) opened the nation's first major exhibition of works by the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh. Both are signal moments in American art history. While the MOMA opening initiated a string of events that eventually would make van Gogh an American icon, Evans's work over the next 18 months is generally regarded as his definitive contribution to American photography.<sup>1</sup> The FSA assignments themselves were undoubtedly the key provocation for this extraordinary creative streak; however, Evans's approach to these assignments owes a great and largely unacknowledged debt to the MOMA exhibition. Although I know of no direct record that Evans either saw the van Gogh show or explicitly acknowledged its influence on his government photography, the circumstantial evidence for such influence is clear in the facts of Evans's life, in the photographs themselves, and in the texts that shaped their creation and reception.

It does no disservice to the quality of Evans's photography to note that his career benefited from well-placed friends among MOMA's executive staff. In the early 1930s,

---

<sup>1</sup> Influential readings of Evans's photography—including Pare Lorenz in 1938 and John Szarkowski in 1971—accord enormous weight to these 18 months with the FSA.

Evans lived in New York and traveled in a social circle that included many of the young museum's curators, directors, and advisory council members, including Alfred Barr, Thomas Mabry, Dorothy Miller, and Lincoln Kirstein (Rathbone 63). The museum began hiring Evans to photograph its exhibitions in 1930, and in 1933 MOMA's architectural galleries displayed 39 of his photographs of Victorian houses—the result of a collaborative project conceived by Kirstein (Rathbone 63; 85). During his 18 months with the FSA, Evans maintained both an apartment in New York and his contacts at MOMA, and this relationship bore fruit in the 1938 single-artist exhibition American Photographs, a first both for the museum and for Evans. In 1935-36, then, Evans's periodic tours throughout the South coincided with an increasing, nationwide recognition of a triumph both for the artist van Gogh and for Evans's friends at the museum.

In itself, of course, this historical parallel does not suggest that the painter's work influenced the photographer's. In fact, at first glance few visual artists share less in common. Van Gogh was painter of storm and stress; the reviews considered below are unanimous in emphasizing his drama, color, and energy. The most consistent notes in Evans's imagery, on the other hand, are reticence and stasis. With minor exceptions near the end of his life, Evans worked in sharp-focus, black-and-white photography, usually with a large-format, architectural camera that leant itself to static subject matter. Most of his photographs avoid dramatic angles and strong tonal contrasts, concentrating instead on straight lines and muted, middle-range tones. Reviewers often emphasized this technique's distance from the painterly tradition (labeling it "anti-graphic," for example), and Evans himself encouraged this line of evaluation. However, Evans also consistently sought venues for and encouraged readings of his photography as specifically modern art.

It is here that van Gogh's nineteenth-century drawings and paintings and Evans's twentieth-century photography begin to converge.

Although critics have previously noted only an isolated similarity linking these two artists, both Evans's photographic practice and contemporary evaluations of it depended on a particular and pervasive interpretation of van Gogh that conjoined social realism and modernist idealism. This understanding developed, I will demonstrate, both within and as a response to the "van Gogh phenomenon" of the middle 1930s—a widespread mass-cultural celebration of van Gogh sparked by the MOMA exhibition.

This influence did not end with Evans, however, and that brings me to a second, larger point. The van Gogh phenomenon—fundamentally a set of texts and interpretive practices that spanned the divide between modernism and mass culture—provides a template vital to the understanding of the 1930s documentary movement in general. Van Gogh's influence on Evans represents only a single moment in a broader trend: the dependence of thirties documentary photography on the fine arts. Throughout the decade, documentary photography traveled alongside reproductions of artistic masterpieces in the same mass-media and artistic circles, and their proximity shaped valuations of both the photography and the art. In these years, for example, Van Gogh became a documentary artist whose great strength lay in his sympathetic and accurate vision of agricultural life and labor. In a similar manner, the painter's empathetic persona infused the photographic record promoted by the New Deal, reinforcing the photography's aesthetic and moral authority and, therefore, its rhetorical effect. Thirties documentary claimed the mantle of science, but it did so within a discourse that mobilized the aesthetic, expressive, and visionary resonance of modernist art. It was from this contradictory mixture—a



combination enabled by the mingling of mass culture and high art in the decade's photographic media—that documentary drew its persuasive power.

To argue this thesis, this chapter first takes up the van Gogh phenomenon, examining the process that transformed an obscure nineteenth-century Dutch painter into the most celebrated artist of the European tradition. It then investigates the visual parallels linking paintings and drawings from the van Gogh exhibition to some of Evans's most renowned documentary photographs. Finally, the chapter analyzes the textual accompaniment to Evans's work, with a particular emphasis on two extended readings from the middle and late 1930s—James Agee's contribution to Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, a collaborative documentary book on the lives of three families of Alabama tenant farmers, and Lincoln Kirstein's essay "Photographs of America: Walker Evans," published as part of the museum catalog for American Photographs. This analysis demonstrates that Agee and Kirstein saw Evans's documentary practice as nothing less than an attempt to forge a means of visual representation appropriate to a new stage of modernity. And like Evans himself, Agee and Kirstein drew on the aesthetic and political resonance of van Gogh's example.

### **The Van Gogh Phenomenon**

Opening on November 5, 1935, MOMA's single-artist exhibition Vincent van Gogh presented 127 drawings, water colors, and oil paintings by the artist on three floors of the museum's townhouse at West 53rd Street. Originally scheduled for six months and seven venues, the exhibition finally closed its second installation at MOMA fourteen months later. Its extended tour included ten cities, and by September 1936 more than 50

others had offered to serve as host ("92136-20" 1). More than 900,000 people attended the show (including 227,000 in San Francisco alone), an audience that surpassed the total for any previous single-artist exhibition in U.S. history. In the process, van Gogh's blockbuster success secured the five-year-old museum's status as one of America's most influential cultural institutions. As one historian noted, "It is unlikely—indeed, inconceivable—that any other art exhibition has ever had such an immediate impact on the public taste as the van Gogh show" (Lynes 135).

Van Gogh's appeal astonished both supporters and opponents, who struggled with one of the questions that concerns this chapter: Why van Gogh? What fueled the enormous appeal of this particular painter at this moment in American history? Or, as a newspaper columnist in Cleveland put it, "Just what combination of circumstances is it that causes people to flock in swarming multitudes to see the works of a single crazy Dutch painter as if he were a combination of Ringling Bros. Circus, Jack Benny and a two-headed horse?" (McDermott).<sup>2</sup>

The motive forces behind such widespread appeal were surely heterogeneous, and what follows will not attempt to answer this question definitively. A clear contributing factor, however, was the merchandising frenzy that surrounded the exhibition, fed in part by the new museum's "expert press-agentry" ("All-Time High" 120). The show's popular success, for example, generated two reprintings of Lust for Life, Irving Stone's 1934

---

<sup>2</sup> This and many of the other newspaper and journal reviews cited in this chapter are collected in a scrapbook compiled by MOMA president A. Conger Goodyear and available in the museum archives. Reproductions of the scrapbook are also available on microfilm from the American Association of Art.

fictionalized biography; a Reader's Digest condensation of that novel; reproductions in the Sunday picture sections of major newspapers across the country; multiple new editions reproducing van Gogh's paintings; a popular edition of the artist's letters to his brother Theo; and a vogue for the painter's palette and iconography in the period's fashions, shop-window displays, and advertising.

Shoppers walking down Fifth Avenue in the fall of 1935, for example, would discover that Fortune magazine was not alone in its appreciation of fine art's usefulness in business. Within weeks of the exhibition's opening, the Art Digest commended the results of the commercial vogue that accompanied it:

Seldom has an exhibition aroused such enthusiasm as that at the MOMA and never within our memory has there been such constant visual reinforcement from unexpected sources. . . . Now prints of the greater part of the artist's oeuvre appear so inescapably in window after window that even the casual stroller is likely to gather without effort impressions that equal in extent those usually obtained by earnest students from special brochures and books. ("Art Progenies")

Led by Saks Fifth Avenue, New York's retailers capitalized on van Gogh's sudden popularity, integrating his palette and style into both their window displays and their merchandise. Some readers condemned the Art News for praising such commercial exploitation, but others supported it on populist grounds:

I feel that art is not only for the "privileged few" who visit art galleries, but also for the world at large and I believe that our country would benefit greatly by having more shop windows making use of the decorative values of Van Gogh....If the colors and styles of today are to be chosen from the palette of Vincent Van Gogh, I think that here is a just cause for much rejoicing. (Stevens)

Of course, such an argument runs counter to the art pour l'art formalism that became MOMA orthodoxy after WWII. These merchandising initiatives promoted a

thing that we have learned to call kitsch, and in traditional histories of American modernism this is the opposite of "art." Because MOMA often appears in such histories as the standard-bearer of an austere, Greenbergian formalism, the suggestion that the museum supported this trend might seem surprising.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, in the 1930s art pour l'art represented only one among a diverse array of competing aesthetic faiths, and good evidence suggests that MOMA encouraged the commercial frenzy that grew up around its exhibition.<sup>4</sup> In the context of the Great Depression's economic and cultural crises—a moment when the boundaries separating institution art from mass culture blurred considerably—both the museum and its canonical modernists could be seen as vital contributors to commercial culture. That the museum would support this blending of commerce and art should not surprise us, since its original charter claimed that encouraging the application of the modern arts "to manufacture and practical life" would be a central aspect of new museum's mission (Goodyear, MOMA 15-16). Through its van Gogh exhibition, the museum achieved this goal with unprecedented success.

Although MOMA's publicity campaign for the exhibition met strong criticism from within the museum community, Alfred H. Barr, the museum's founding director, proved to be at least ambivalent about encouraging the painter's mass appeal (Marquis 134). In a contemporary press release, for example, Barr argued that van Gogh's popularity among "the great aesthetically naive public" was "just what the artist himself

---

<sup>3</sup> On MOMA's curatorial history, see Crimp, Phillips, Cockcroft, and Guilbaut.

<sup>4</sup> Personal correspondence housed in the museum's Department of Registration archives also supports this conclusion. See van Gogh exhibition (No. 44), "Dept. and Catalogue Material File, Corresp. o-z."

would most passionately have desired" ("122735-43" 2). As this quotation suggests, both van Gogh's "passionate desires" and the wellsprings of his contemporary appeal proved to be contentious topics in the wake of MOMA's success. The exhibition, "hailed by the radical press no less than by the fashionable periodicals," became the site of an explicitly political debate that attempted to make sense of the contradictory legacies inscribed within the painter's biography and oeuvre (Benson 7). Rather than through any authoritative resolution, however, it was these contradictions themselves that made the painter a Depression-era icon.

In short, Vincent van Gogh found a huge and passionate American audience in the middle thirties because the fundamental discontinuities of his art and life resonated within the contradictions of a society reeling from economic meltdown. Basic categories of knowledge and evidence were in crisis, and within this contested terrain the image of the artist as impassioned and truthful seer took on resonant importance. The artistic subject "van Gogh" came to stand for a social vision that could reconcile irreconcilables, bridging the divide that separated art from science, nature from culture, and the metaphysical from the physical realms. And because these reconciliations remained imaginary, Depression-era discussions of van Gogh's achievements took on a characteristically confused form.

### **From the Borinage to Arles**

Vincent van Gogh's life and oeuvre are both marked by a number of false starts and discontinuities. Born in 1853 and raised in southern Holland, van Gogh embarked on numerous careers and failed, during his lifetime, in all of them. Van Gogh worked first as a picture salesman at a family gallery, then as a bookseller, a teacher, an evangelical

minister to poor miners in Belgium, and, finally, in the last ten years of his life, as an artist. His paintings themselves demonstrate unusual shifts of style and subject matter. In the 1930s (and, often, today) this variety was read as a split between early and late periods, divided at 1886, when van Gogh moved to Paris and encountered Impressionism firsthand. Van Gogh's drawings and paintings before this period demonstrate the strong influence of the early Dutch masters and later Realists including Honoré Daumier and François Millet. Their emphasis is on draftsmanship, tonal variation, and genre scenery, while their palette draws from a muted range of blacks, grays, browns, and greens. In Paris, the most fundamental elements of van Gogh's art transformed. Contrasts of color replaced those of tone, an emphasis on painting replaced drawing, and the early concentration on the lives of proletarian and agricultural laborers shifted to a more varied range of landscape, still-life from nature, and portraiture. Present-day assessments of the van Gogh's oeuvre generally privilege these later canvasses, most created in the French provincial towns of Arles and St. Rémy during the final five years of the painter's life.

Compared to present-day evaluations, however, the most widely circulated interpretations of the 1930s gave great weight to van Gogh's early work in Belgium and the Netherlands. Irving Stone's 1934 Lust for Life, for example, devoted more than 80 pages to van Gogh's evangelical and artistic ministries to the Belgian miners in the Borinage, while abbreviating or ignoring many of his later, more artistically productive periods (Heugten 165). In 1936, Stone published articles in conjunction with the MOMA openings in New York and San Francisco, and his approach is apparent in many other reviews as well. As a result, drawings and paintings that are today treated as preliminary and unschooled were often given an attention equal to that of the later, Post-Impressionist

canvases. One final, broad tendency of the period's interpretations merits attention here. Despite the numerous shifts and discontinuities in van Gogh's life—and despite a simultaneous understanding of van Gogh's oeuvre as bifurcated by the encounter with Impressionism—1930s readings of van Gogh were also marked by attempts to articulate the artist's life and art as a unitary narrative of struggle toward redemption.

An important part of the answer to "Why van Gogh?" lies in these two (contradictory) tendencies. The painter's Depression-era popularity depended on this structural dichotomy between the early and late periods, read as a narrative of contest and reconciliation. Their combination in the work of a single artist enabled viewers to stage van Gogh's oeuvre as a scene of revolutionary struggle. In such readings, the artist's tortured, visionary personality acted as the middle term of a hoped-for dialectical synthesis—between a suffering realism associated with an earthy, agricultural past and a transcendent idealism connected to a redeemed, modernized future.

American interpretations of van Gogh's art did not, of course, spring up fully formed in response to the MOMA exhibition. As Carol Zemel has demonstrated in her groundbreaking The Formation of a Legend: Van Gogh Criticism, 1890-1920, a substantial critical tradition was already established in Europe before van Gogh's full-scale introduction to the American public in 1935-36. Critical reactions to the MOMA show followed the major themes of this tradition, stressing

- a symbolist aesthetics that emphasized painterly form—color, line, and brushstroke—and a subjectivist and mystical idealism;

- a biographical approach that read van Gogh's life as a parable of Romantic alienation and unrecognized genius, in which the paintings became expressive records of the artist's struggle, heroism, and redemption; or
- a socialist reading that emphasized van Gogh's debt to the earlier Realist movements in Holland and France, finding in the painter's art and life the embodiment of anti-capitalist, communitarian ideals.

Occasionally these interpretations appeared in relatively unmixed form. A review in the radical journal Art Front, for example, took a purely socialist standpoint, dismissing the "color-occultism" of van Gogh's Post-Impressionist period in favor of his early work among the poor: "In our own day, van Gogh might not have found his original efforts to speak to the working people in whose society he lived so inconsistent with the movement of art" (Rosenberg 6). In contrast, Herbert McBride of the New York Sun valued only the later canvasses, which he read as the products of mystical ecstasies, moments when the painter "left all earthy, animal attributes behind him, and became pure spirit, giving out emanations entirely unexplainable to us lesser mortals." Absent this otherworldly inspiration, McBride argued, van Gogh was "an exceedingly commonplace painter."

In general, however, reactions to the MOMA show were more muddled. Most reviews praised both the early and the later work, and most did so by mixing elements of two or more of the approaches that I have labeled symbolist, biographical, and socialist. This confusion is itself significant, and I will delineate its layers and effects through close readings of three important reviews of the exhibition: first, from the New York Times,



then as now the source of American journalism's most authoritative art criticism; second, from the Communist weekly New Masses, an important venue in light of van Gogh's continuing status as a "people's artist"; and third, from a lengthy article published in the American Magazine of Art that attempted to draw together van Gogh's early and late periods as the combined legacy of the "real Vincent, the social visionary, the brilliantly lucid thinker, the revolutionary artist" (Benson 6). Because these three writers register tensions characteristic of many other reviews, they repay careful scrutiny.

The overt structure of the argument presented by the New York Times's reviewer Edward Alden Jewell, for example, is dialectical.<sup>5</sup> Jewell articulates van Gogh's early career as the first stage in a confrontation of polar oppositions: Van Gogh, "a creature of violent extremes," struggles through a life marked by conflict between God and the devil, spirit and fleshly resistance. The artist, aspiring to pure spirit, confronts nature, both in his recalcitrant materials and in the prosaic material world of his peasant subjects. Jewell then posits moments of triumphant synthesis, as van Gogh catches "fugitive glimpses of a beauty that can transfigure everything" [emphasis added]. These fleeting moments bring heaven to earth, gratifying van Gogh with visions of "a real ideal life." The swirling line and hallucinogenic color of the later canvasses—for Jewell the "fullest splendor" of van Gogh's art—therefore become images of synthesis and fulfillment. However, a close reading of Jewell's review demonstrates that his proposed dialectic unravels by its end,

---

<sup>5</sup> All citations of Jewell's article below refer to page 9. Jewell's dialectical reading of van Gogh's life and art followed the interpretation presented by the German critic Julius Meier-Graefe in his 1912 biography.

entangled within the text's contradictory valuations of van Gogh's working-class subject matter.

The review opens with a series of metaphors that depict a conflict of polar oppositions—between the whole and the fragment, clarity and obscurity, holiness and evil, spirit and flesh. As soon as he sketches these oppositions, however, Jewell equivocates. The result is a notably opaque opening paragraph:

As we strive to fit together the pieces and see the man whole, Vincent van Gogh's short life may seem to us to have been a field in which was waged an almost unremitting conflict between God and the devil; between the spirit that aspired to all things great and good, and stubbornly recalcitrant flesh that at every step essayed to negative achievement. Yet this devil of which we speak was no malevolent Satan; nor did God show His face continually with the sweet, benevolent clearness that can make an issue plain. One groped and stumbled. The glass through which one strove to look was dimmed by the breath of many failures.

It is the reviewer's attitude toward what he labels both flesh and "the devil" that is the source of the confusion here. The spirit/flesh opposition is of course a traditional and Christian one, but Jewell asserts that van Gogh's devil was neither Satan nor malevolent. Instead, it seems here to be the prosaic failure and misfortune that dogged van Gogh's life, and its effects are to obscure and obstruct. In this opening section, then, Jewell offers readers a view of the paintings as flashes of visionary mysticism. Van Gogh's life was, Jewell writes, "a hell-on-earth shot through with radiance." Before fleeting visions of a "real ideal life," Jewell continues, "the tortured heart would kneel in exaltation and fine humility."

Yet in the second section of the review—dealing with van Gogh's early work in Belgium and Holland—Jewell shifts from visions of transcendent clarity to an evocation of smoke and potato steam. The reviewer twice declared a desire to "hasten on from these

early Dutch and Belgian periods" to the more celebrated canvasses from van Gogh's later work in France. Yet the article spends two and one-half column inches on the early Potato Eaters (F 82), more space by far than that given to any other painting. Jewell begins:

There is a world of love and spiritual struggle implicit in that harsh yet oddly tender "Potato Eaters," painted at Nuenen in 1885. Craft was wanting, but with what passionate singleness of purpose Vincent strove to come to grips with the reality that makes his subject meaningful.

In this paragraph's first sentence, the review continues in the vein that it began, portraying Potato Eaters as the ground of struggle between a loving spirit and a materialist resistance. Here, though, the recalcitrant material becomes the unruly implements of the painter's craft—the brush and oil paint van Gogh strove to master at this early moment in his career. "Craft was wanting," Jewell states, and by this he refers obliquely to the familiar criticism that van Gogh could not draw.

Jewell counters this criticism by making over Potato Eaters' crude figuration and lack of single-point perspective into signifiers for van Gogh's impassioned empathy with his models. In doing so, Jewell drew on the empathetic realism that characterized the decade's documentary expression, stressing, for the moment, the social aspects of van Gogh's artistic praxis. To effect this changed image of van Gogh—from aspiring spirit to social documentarian—Jewell draws on a quotation from van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo:

He sensed that "if a peasant picture smells of bacon, smoke and potato steam," it is right, with a rightness that could never be come at through glib, conventional brush refinements of the studio.

"I have tried to make it clear," he told Theo, "how those people, eating their potatoes under the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish."

This passage allows Jewell to link specific painterly techniques—self-taught figuration and the absence of conventional polish—to the moral authority of manual labor, a connection that encouraged Jewell's audience to identify van Gogh with the honest laborers pictured. The crucial point, however, is that Jewell's vision of van Gogh's art does not stop with this equation of the striving artist and his impoverished models. This move toward an empathetic realism marks a step along the way toward a (seeming) resolution of the material/spiritual struggle. Van Gogh is presented in the opening section as the essence of spirit. In this second section, this spirit confronts materialist resistance and physical anguish. Finally, Jewell arrives at his third and final section, with a moment of revelation: "Paris opened Vincent's eyes to a brave new world. There, under Theo's guidance, he met the Impressionists and drank eagerly from their cup of light; a cup that, at the first inebriating sip, could wean one away from all the old turbid opaqueness."

From a progressive political perspective, there is much to critique here. After Paris, Van Gogh changed not just palettes but also subject matter. He rarely returned to the stark portrayals of agricultural and industrial labor that were so important in his early career. With the phrase "old turbid opaqueness," Jewell effectively equates the obscuring and recalcitrant "devil" of his opening paragraph with the poverty and suffering of van Gogh's early subjects. Both are swept away through a mystifying "doctrine of brilliant color." All that remains is the visionary Artist, and Jewell stages these final years of van Gogh's work as triumphant expressions of the painter's personality: "a personality that could project itself with rare and often marvelous completeness in terms of art."

In Jewell's discussion, then, a shift occurs in the evaluation of van Gogh's art from the Dutch period to the later work in France. Potato Eaters is praised for its fidelity to the

meanings of the pictured scene. Later work is praised for its originality of brushstroke and unique "signature." The review shifts ground from mimesis to expression, but the blurred terms elide these essentially contradictory valuations of art. In both, van Gogh's sinuous line and self-taught figuration become meaningful, but in Potato Eaters they signify the painter's solidarity with the men and women portrayed, while in later canvasses they become signs of a uniquely expressive personality. Jewell bridges these fundamentally different evaluations of painting with references to van Gogh's "sincerity." The word occurs in all three sections, and the morality accorded to the painter's earnest struggle allows the works to be simultaneously read as faithful representation and as impassioned, transcendent expression.

Although Jewell ignores the material world portrayed in the later canvasses, focusing instead on the painter's anguished expression, the potato eaters do live on as subtext. The vestiges that remain demonstrate one motivation for Jewell's early emphasis on Potato Eaters and empathetic realism. In the review's final paragraph, Jewell praises MoMA's treatment of the artist, locating the exhibition's curators and its audience in precisely the same position relative to van Gogh that the painter was seen to occupy before his peasant models:

It is a superb exhibition, evidencing...vital, warm, discerning sympathy, lacking which there can be no effectual penetration through to the tortured, aspiring heart of Vincent van Gogh, or to the core of his so sincerely and so passionately wrought expression.

Jewell's final suggestion, then, is that viewers who identify with the ethical core of van Gogh's artistic project—tortured, aspiring, passionate, and sincere—take on the moral

authority ascribed to the artist himself, an authority that Jewell earlier equated with the poverty and humility of agricultural labor.

In other words, while the realist aura attributed to van Gogh's early work seems to disappear by the end of a review, it in fact sustains Jewell's aesthetics. True feeling for the artworks can only be achieved by a penetration through the canvas and into the "tortured, aspiring heart" of the human subject posited on its other side. This movement is framed as a transcendence of material resistance, and Jewell first envisions the artist as its agent, confronting his peasant models and painterly media. The marks of van Gogh's struggle are left on the canvas, and these are endowed with a Christian, utopian resonance. Finally, the sympathetic audience embraces this tortured artistry, completing their journey into van Gogh's tortured heart.

Jewell's final emphasis on the artistic personality was not uncommon in the 1930s, and it is not surprising to find such a reading in a mainstream venue like the New York Times. What distinguished the van Gogh show from other exhibitions, however, was the breadth of its appeal. Jewell's submerged reliance on the moral force of realism begins to illuminate the sources of that breadth. What might surprise, for example, is the point-by-point resemblance to Jewell's van Gogh demonstrated by the artistic persona constructed by the Communist weekly New Masses.

Like Jewell's, Stephen Alexander's van Gogh is the hero of a moral crusade, struggling toward visions of something very like "the real ideal life." And like Jewell, Alexander presents this vision as the combined product of van Gogh's early and late periods. Alexander claims van Gogh for "the great tradition of revolutionary art," arguing that his entire oeuvre reflects a single, coherent goal:

Both his early work and his later, impressionist paintings are complementary aspects of a single fundamental attitude. Van Gogh was in search of truth. Violently, uncompromisingly in search of truth. He loved humanity and nature warmly and with passionate intensity. His simplicity was tantamount to a fanatic honesty. He set down on canvas and in drawings his straightforward observations and knowledge of life about him in essentially the same manner...whether it was a weaver at work, a peasant woman's head, or a vase of flowers. (29)

The key to van Gogh's truth is once again empathy, and the signs of this empathy are once again the marks of the painter's "crude, sincere, and direct methods." Like Jewell, Alexander equates the paintings' seeming crudity with their creator's sincerity. The weaver referred to by Alexander, for example, is probably the Weaver: Interior with Three Windows (F 37), painted 15 months before Potato Eaters. Like the later canvas, the Weaver uses blocky, simplified forms and a flattened, unconventional perspective to portray a working-class figure within a darkened interior. The manual labor that van Gogh claimed as the implicit subject of Potato Eaters here it becomes the explicit theme. The monstrous bulk of the loom intrudes between the figure and the viewer's gaze, revealing a worker who is "fortressed in the machine's housing and distanced by tentacular beams that menace the foreground space" (Zemel, Van Gogh's Progress 81). The result is a grim and foreboding image of the artisan's working life, and Alexander pours scorn on those who rejected or ignored it during van Gogh's life:

What need had a smug, effete mercantile bourgeoisie for these deeply sympathetic, tragic statements of the lives of the working class on the walls of their luxury homes? They would have none of this awkward, uncouth lout...who did not know how to draw, nor the meaning of art. (30)

Here again, van Gogh's awkward draftsmanship is taken as a sign of inspired difference, a sympathetic identification that supports and sustains his canvasses' realism. In the

following sentence, however, Alexander assimilates the dramatically different Sunflower canvasses (cf. F 458) under the same sign: "Van Gogh's dynamic, radiant statements about nature were no better received than his earlier statements about humanity" (30).

For Alexander, then, all of Van Gogh's varied, modernist challenges to the artistic tradition—simplified figuration, flattened perspective, and dazzling, discordant color—become signifiers of the artist's revolutionary perception and moral authority. Despite their differences, the New Masses and the New York Times made similar linkages between conflict, passion, truth, and painterly form. While Alexander privileges the painter's early realism and Jewell the later Post-Impressionism, both critics depend on a synthesis that crosses the polar oppositions of a realist/idealist divide. Van Gogh's work becomes a record of the painter's life-long battle to transcend a vale of suffering, marking his struggle toward (for Alexander) "a decent and a better world" and (for Jewell) a "real ideal life."

The epistemological correspondence submerged within these competing stories of opposition, confrontation, and Christ-like passion—both tales spun around a Dutch artist who had died almost a half century before—became more explicit in a long article published a few months later in the American Magazine of Art. Like Jewell and Alexander, Gertrude Benson presented van Gogh as a brilliantly perceptive seer, a revolutionary artist whose artistic vision manifest a synthesis of idealist and materialist oppositions. For Benson, as for many other critics, the combination of sturdy provincialism, generally associated with van Gogh's line, and the lyricism, mysticism, and modernism attributed to his color underlay the painter's status as both "social



visionary" and "revolutionary artist." It was this combination, Benson argued, that fueled the MOMA exhibition's phenomenal success.

Between 1929 and 1936, Benson writes, American audiences lost interest in "refinements of form and color for their own sake, in abstract invention and construction, in easel-egocentricities":

The economic débâcle brought with it the rediscovery of the subject, and, in a sense, the rediscovery of van Gogh. A man who could write in 1882—"To stroll on wharves, and in alleys, and in streets, and in the houses, waiting rooms, even saloons—that is not a pleasant pastime unless for an artist. As such one would rather be in the dirtiest place where there is something to draw than at a tea party with charming ladies. Unless one wants to draw ladies, then a tea party is all right even for an artist"—such a man is curiously in tune with our own age. (7)

As this passage explicitly signals, the Great Depression forms a constant background for Benson's evaluation of van Gogh; in both form and content, the passage reflects the documentary aesthetic that shaped public discourse about the economic breakdown. Benson builds her appeal to van Gogh's realism around a quotation from the artist's letters, reinforcing the documentary factuality of this evocation of "the dirtiest places." However, like Jewell, Benson simultaneously registers a lack of ease; the qualifications "in a sense" and "curiously" manifest a significant tension.

It is indeed curious to claim the painter of the Starry Night (F 612) and the Night Cafe (F 463) as a realist; yet this equation of crudity, sincerity, and realism is echoed in multiple thirties reactions: "What remains, and pulls him through, is something stirring about the struggle, something that flows from an impassioned search after truth....[I]t is the prosaic realist who ultimately prevails, crude, hampered, but indomitably honest" (Cortissoz). Or again, from the journal Parnassus: "What if van Gogh has no chic, in the

sense of slickness? He had what is infinitely better—sincerity, zeal, and vision" (Lane). Or, as Alexander of the New Masses put it in short, "His simplicity was tantamount to a fanatic honesty" (29). The realism of van Gogh was, for the 1930s, a impassioned realism, grounded in the poverty and misery of the artist's life, and signified by the marks of intensity in his art. As the quotations here suggest, this "stirring struggle," "zeal," and "fanatic honesty" supported van Gogh's claims to truth.

As a result, van Gogh's persona takes its place among the reliable, passionate eyewitnesses peopling the sub-genre William Stott identifies, in Documentary Expression and Thirties America, as "vicarious" documentary reportage (33-45). In such texts, the impassioned reactions of a first-person narrator were meant to guide the audience's feelings about the events portrayed. Noting the period's fascination with Walt Whitman's "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there," Stott writes, "To be trustworthy, a speaker needed to be the man or a firsthand witness; if he had suffered also, it would help" (36).

For widespread American audiences during the thirties, van Gogh's suffering clearly supported the authenticity of his pictures. "Tortured Soul," for example, a Reader's Digest condensation of Irving Stone's biography, portrayed van Gogh's life in the Borinage as one long, anguished process of identification: "Now he was living like the miners, eating the same food, sleeping in the identical bed....At last he was one of them, and had won the right to bring them the Word of God" (119). Stone's concurrent emphasis on van Gogh's Christian evangelism, however, suggests the second, idealist side of the painter's appeal. Like Benson, Stone equates the impulses that led van Gogh to Christian ministry with those that took him to Arles as a Post-Impressionist painter. Both journeys became the quests of a utopian visionary. Unlike Stone's abrupt conflation,

however, Benson's reading of the later canvasses consistently places van Gogh within a contested social terrain.

Benson's evocation of wharves, alleys, and other working-class spaces—combined with her equivocal recognition that Van Gogh seems "curiously in tune with our age"—signals the dualities she will find in the painter's later canvasses. She consistently discovers Potato Eaters in van Gogh's later work: in the hands, body, and face of "the sturdy, provincial communard," Père Tanguy (F 363), in similar aspects of La Berceuse (F 504), and in the dramatic lighting and bent figures of the Night Café. Simultaneously, she isolates a counter-tendency: "in the deep diagonal compositions of the bedroom and the café, in the superbly patterned background of 'La Berceuse' there is also an expansion of his technical scope, a deliberate contrast of the soft lyric note and the symphonic crescendo" (16). For Benson, van Gogh becomes both man-of-the-people and utopian socialist. His oeuvre figures, simultaneously, a forthright, earthy realism and a prophetic idealism. It is on this unstable combination that van Gogh's extraordinary appeal was founded, and it is on this same combination—I will demonstrate in the following pages—that documentary expression depended.

### **Walker Evans: Art and the Machine**

At President Roosevelt's prompting, in 1935 the U.S. Congress created a new federal agency, the Resettlement Administration (RA), to address the agricultural crises brought on by the Great Depression and a series of widespread natural disasters. Although the world of New York art galleries and museums might seem remote from such a project, in its first year the RA allocated part of its \$277 million budget to a task

that seemed remarkable, even at the time. While devoting most of its energies to removing small farmers from over-cultivated land, the agency also hired a corps of photographers to make a comprehensive record of America's agricultural regions and their inhabitants (First Annual Report 173). The result of this initiative is an archive of more than 270,000 photographs, today housed in the Library of Congress.

Many other federal agencies employed photographers, of course, both before and after the New Deal. What made this project extraordinary was the fact that the RA claimed to be creating both historical documents and works of art:

There are three ways of evaluating photographs: as a mere record; for their immediacy and news value; as works of art....In the photographic work of the Resettlement Administration it was decided to submit all material to the three foregoing criteria. (First Annual Report 173)

In June 1936, the RA claimed success. Its photography's unprecedented popularity "in the press, the literature, and in the art circles of the United States" fully justified this novel approach (173). As I have outlined above, in the same span of months, the nation simultaneously became fascinated with Vincent van Gogh, whose images of simpler, rural and provincial folk began to seem "curiously in tune" with the contemporary moment.

To help illuminate the patterns shaping this correspondence, I will focus below on the work of Walker Evans, the RA (and, later, FSA) photographer considered the most "artistic" during the period. My reading is not, however, a part of the critical tradition that seeks to distinguish Evans's practice either from the aims of his federal employers or from the work of other documentary photographers. As the First Annual Report suggests, the agency encouraged all of its photographers to pursue artistic aims, and the

extraordinary work produced by FSA photographers including Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, and Ben Shahn offers dramatic evidence of this approach's success. Because Evans's photography circulated more frequently within explicitly high-art contexts, a close reading of the texts that surrounded Evans's work helps make visible the appeals to artistic iconography and poetics that underlay most documentary photography during this period.

To begin, the most fundamental similarity between the worlds pictured by van Gogh and Evans lies in their shared emphasis on agricultural life and labor. This point merits emphasis because it counters a common misapprehension of van Gogh as an artist of nature. Natural themes do predominate in the painter's later canvasses, but the paintings almost never omit signs of human habitation and cultivation. Both Evans and van Gogh were artists of human society—with a particular emphasis on agrarian society and labor. Two metonymic representations of that labor are the source of a frequently remarked parallel between the two.

#### **Still Life: A Pair of Shoes (F 461) and "Floyd Burroughs' Work Boots"**

As I pointed out in chapter 1, Evans's photograph of "Floyd Burroughs' Work Boots," made in 1936, echoes the theme of several paintings made by Van Gogh between 1886 and 1888, including the Still Life: A Pair of Shoes that was a part of the MOMA exhibition. Both images present a pair of well-worn shoes within a flat, horizontal plane, and both share obvious similarities in treatment and angle of vision. The earthy, unpolished textures of the rough tile and bare dirt backgrounds, for example, reinforce the signs of hard use in the shoes. Both images are lit from the upper left, as is evident from

the shadows underneath the shoes. This explicit citation of van Gogh has been noted in numerous discussions of Evans's photography, including two of the best, by William Stott and T.V. Reed.

Both Stott and Reed focus on the contrasts between the images rather than their similarities, and both critics privilege the photograph over the painting. For Stott and Reed, the images' resemblance serves to emphasize the differences between the media of oil paint and light-sensitive chemistry, rather than any essential continuity in Evans's and van Gogh's artistic projects. Furthermore, Evans's photo-realism takes on a moral resonance: the photograph's plain truth is contrasted with the idealizing falsehoods of high art and the mass media. However, while Stott's and Reed's similarities manifest an important continuity within scholarship on documentary photography, their differences also mark a useful distinction, indicating the paradigm shift that occurred within American scholarship since the early 1970s. While for Stott the distinction between van Gogh and Evans rests in the ontology of the photographic image, for Reed the differences lie in the images' participation in different systems of discursive signification.

Published in 1972, William Stott's Documentary Expression and Thirties America reads the two images within a critical tradition that stretched back to the nineteenth-century origins of photography. For this tradition, the special nature of the photographic process results in a image with a direct connection to the object represented. (An influential argument for this linkage is found in Andre Bazan's What is Cinema?) This same understanding of photography underlies the camera's primacy in realist aesthetics. In keeping with that tradition, Stott finds more to praise in Evans's photograph than in van Gogh's painting: "The photograph is better because merely factual; Van Gogh

sentimentalized his boots, made them as wistfully ragged and gay as Norman Rockwell would" (273).

The structure of this contrast—Evans on one side, van Gogh and Rockwell on the other—marks the crucial distinction as one of fact versus fiction. Van Gogh and the magazine illustrator Norman Rockwell are paired; the pure truth of Evans's photography is defined against the fictions of both art and commerce. In contrast to these false images, Stott suggests, Evans's photograph captures the plain and unadorned beauty "of the literal, of the world as it is" (273). Stott goes on to argue that this beauty has a class. It is "the beauty of the lower classes and the poor" (273). In other words, Stott's evaluation of the photograph continues the realist, humanist tradition that structured Edward Alen Jewell's celebration of van Gogh's Potato Eaters. For both critics, the harsh beauty of the images stemmed from their intimate connection to a bare, stripped world and a pure, earthy folk—each constructed as uniquely Real. For Stott, of course, the medium of oil paint could never sustain such a connection. Instead, the truth and moral authority of Evans's image depended on the unique ability of photography to document rather than invent. By removing the biases associated with bourgeois culture—represented by fine art and the mass media—Evans's photograph reveals "the world as it is," considered the special province of the lower classes.

Stott's Documentary Expression appeared prior to the seachange in American humanities scholarship effected by the widespread triumph of post-structuralist and cultural studies paradigms. As a result, many of the categories to which Stott refers are now in disrepute. In particular, the structuralist and post-structuralist critique of stable signification—including a rejection of the photographic signifier's direct relationship to

its referent—once accepted, undermines the ontological authority on which realism often depends. Within this new paradigm, the rigid distinction between van Gogh and Evans can no longer be supported by reference to the unique properties of photography. However, the humanist concerns that motivated Stott's allegiance to the camera do continue to influence this new generation of critics, and it is notable that Reed's postmodernist appraisal of Evans continues to depend on the photographer's differences from Vincent van Gogh.

T.V. Reed's aim is to demonstrate that Evans's 1936 collaboration with the poet and journalist James Agee, which resulted in a documentary book Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, is an early example of new genre, Postmodernist Realism: "The text's aesthetic sophistication stands in critique of simple realism, while its political concerns (as embodied in the tenants) critique the normative self-referentiality of (post)modernism" (24). For Reed, the photograph "Floyd Burroughs' Work Boots" achieves this two-pronged critique by blending the opposed discursive modes of documentary realism and high-art aestheticism. This double-coding, Reed argues, highlights the limits of both discursive systems. The "universalizing qualities latent in Van Gogh's aestheticizing of the shoes," Reed argues, are "driven by the photograph (in the context of Praise) back onto the very particular body" of Floyd Burroughs, the Alabama tenant farmer who owned the shoes. Readers of Praise will endow the photograph with an realist authority—so that Burroughs's "specific human weight can be felt in these shoes"—while at the same time the photograph's allusion to van Gogh "reminds us that our vision is being directed aesthetically by Evans, that there is no



simple documentary apprehension of these objects or of the human being who wears them" (47-48).

Reed's identification of this double coding and its effects—a visual quotation of van Gogh that provokes a tension felt between the particularity associated with "Floyd Burroughs" and the universalism of high art—offers an astute reading of the photograph's complexities, and my own approach is indebted to his example. Driven by his desire to distinguish Praise from other documentary practice, however, Reed ignores the pervasiveness of a universalizing, utopian aestheticism in the thirties documentary movement as a whole. In fact, high art provided a constant subtext to the documentary movement, and—as is evident in "Floyd Burroughs Work Shoes"—the relationship was rarely one of simple disavowal.

Documentary photography, as the Resettlement Administration itself claimed, was simultaneously artistic photography. The historical documents were also offered as human documents, and this second reading marshaled the humanist universalism associated with the fine arts tradition.<sup>6</sup> This widespread, contradictory interpretation of documentary—both realist fact and idealist symbol—was merely more explicit in Evans's case, as the result of the photographer's special relationship with MOMA. In Evans's practice, this aestheticism owes a great debt to Vincent van Gogh; the visual parallels that

---

<sup>6</sup> The phrase "human document" is William Stott's. Thirties documentary, Stott argues, depended on a reading of its texts as expressions of a universal "human condition," in order to establish a felt, emotional bond between the audience and the men and women pictured (3-17).

Reed locates in "Floyd Burroughs' Work Boots" are in fact apparent throughout Evans's documentary portrait of Southern agriculture.

In no other photograph did Evans make such an overt reference to a particular painting or artist. Yet his portrayal of rural and provincial life invites constant reference to the work of van Gogh. In both artists' oeuvres, for example, the material culture of agricultural society—its exterior and interior spaces, tools, clothing, and personal objects—is rendered with a weight and authority more generally accorded to objects d'art. **Van Gogh's Bedroom in Arles (F 482) and "Farm Kitchen, Alabama"**

In his "Farm Kitchen, Alabama," for example, Evans presents a collection of objects sitting four-square on bare wooden flooring. The fine grain of the print reveals the objects' rich and varied surface textures while maintaining a characteristically narrow, middle-tone range. The space is lit to emphasize the objects' three-dimensional solidity, yet the minimal shadows limit reference to a context outside the frame. As a result, the stove, chair, varied containers, and utensils recall similar objects in van Gogh's Bedroom at Arles. In both images, the diagonal lines of floor and walls lend a dynamism and energy to the enclosing space, while the objects' strong outlines and muted tones endow them with a solidity and static serenity. The effect is that of a portrait; the objects seem to pose for the viewer, suggesting the aura of subjecthood that Walter Benjamin posited as the hallmark of fine art objects.

A similar treatment of interior objects is apparent in the "Washroom and Dining Area of Floyd Burroughs' Home." In particular, the bath towel near the left edge of Bedroom at Arles recalls the hanging folds of the towel that Evans locates at the hinge of

a strong vertical divide. As in the kitchen and in Evans's other interior shots, the objects in this photograph are clearly demarcated, set off from one another and from the wooden backdrop. The effect animates the tenant farmers' most prosaic tools and implements, endowing them with an emphatic materiality and presence.

**Peasant Women Binding (F 1262 and F 1264), Wheatfield...with a Reaper (F 617), and "Lucille Burroughs Picking Cotton"**

Evans's and van Gogh's portrayals of agricultural labor demonstrate a similar convergence. The image of a woman bent to dig, plant, bind, or harvest fascinated van Gogh during his years in Neunen, and the MOMA show included four drawings on this theme. In each, the dramatic curve of the laborer's back holds the viewer's attention. The arch suggests the painful tension, while the isolation and abstraction of the figure invest it with the anonymous quality of a "type." Evans composed a similar image of a young woman bent to labor in a cotton field, "Lucille Burroughs Picking Cotton." The treatment of the figure is typical of many van Gogh drawings, and the image as a whole parallels the painting Wheatfield...with a Reaper. Van Gogh here utilized a characteristic impasto technique; the thickly layered paint and scratched surface give the canvas a rough, hay-like texture. This makes a dramatic contrast to the smooth surface of Evans's gelatin silver print, and the resulting images are very different in color and texture. However, similarities of composition and treatment link the images. Both show an anonymous laborer gathering the crop. Both freeze that figure's motion in a strained, awkward position that holds the viewer's eye. And finally, both images merge the human figure with a landscape dominated by the crop. In van Gogh, the yellow color and rough texture of the hay are mirrored even in the sky, while the sinuous line used to construct the human figure is also used to render the crop. In Evans, the tones of the earth and cotton leaves blend with those

of the cotton sack on the laborer's hip, while the cotton plants themselves partially mask the figure, fill the frame, and extend beyond it. In both cases, the figures inhabit a world defined by anonymous and back-breaking toil.

### **Potato Eaters and "Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Family"**

Evans also composed a photograph that recalls the Potato Eaters. Van Gogh's portrayal of a peasant family within the interior space of their home shares a number of similarities with Evans's portrait of the Fields family, included in both Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and American Photographs. Both Potato Eaters and the photograph present an extended, multi-generation family, and both demonstrate a similar concentration on faces and hands.

The major difference here lies the two families' relationships to the viewer. Van Gogh presents a slice of life intended to recall the spiritualized genre scenes of François Millet. The family is focused inward on its evening meal, to the extent that the child is turned completely away from the viewer. The muted, central light source re-enforces this inward orientation. In Evans, in contrast, this is clearly a portrait: a formal event in which the family composed and presented itself for the creation of a likeness. Here, the central child addresses the camera. Both the adult and juvenile figures are given a presence that locates them somewhere between two distinct treatments of the human figure in the pictorial tradition: the anonymous types of genre scenery and the formal portraiture of named, authoritative individuals. The adults in particular are shown to be composed, self-aware, and somewhat guarded. But, as was typical of Evans's and most other

documentary photography, the figures are also given an emblematic status as a representative "Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Family."

Compared to van Gogh's early work in the genre tradition, Evans's portraiture consistently demonstrates this greater individuality and authority. In part this is a product of the differing media, since photography generally insists on a particularity that is not always evident in graphic figuration. Evans's more individualized portraits were also the result of technique, however, as can be seen in two heads of farm women.

**"Head of a Woman with Dark Cap" (F 1073) and "Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife"**

"Head of a Woman with Dark Cap" and "Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife" [Allie Mae Burroughs], for example, share clear similarities that extend beyond the overt subject matter. The pen-and-ink drawing composed by van Gogh in 1883 uses hatching to shade both the background and the woman's clothing and face. A final, lightly pigmented wash softens the contrast between ink and paper. The result is a softened, striated texture that merges the figure with its background. In his 1936 portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs, Evans made a number of choices that resulted in a cognate image. First, in prints made during the Depression, Evans closely cropped the negative around the woman's head and shoulders, resulting in a close-up framing, like van Gogh's, dominated by the figure's head and upper torso. Second (and unlike most of his other portraits), Evans here kept the unpainted wooden background in sharp focus. Combined with the close cropping, this makes the horizontal grain of the weathered pine boards an integral part of the image. At least one contemporary observer noted the echoes in figure and ground: "the sharp horizontals of eyebrows, eyes and mouth...are repeated in the three parallel shadows of

the clapboard wall behind, and...the camera's light emphasis on the early wrinkles and the puckered forehead...are delicately repeated in the grain of the wood" (Trilling 100).

The same critic, Lionel Trilling, also stressed that Evans's photograph presented a flatly lit, full-frontal portrait: "it was 'sat for' and 'posed'...the sitter gains in dignity when allowed to defend herself against the camera" (100). In her direct gaze and expression, Trilling argues, Burroughs "refuses to be an object at all—everything in the picture proclaims her to be all subject" (101). This reading emphasizes qualities that distinguish Evans's photograph from van Gogh's earlier drawing. Rather than as a portrait of a specific individual, van Gogh's choices of side lighting, indirect gaze, and meditative expression cast his figure as generic type, an emblematic "peasant woman."

This was not the limit of either Evans's or van Gogh's variations on the tradition of portraiture, however. The subjecthood of Allie Mae Burroughs was not always as apparent as Trilling seemed to assume. For example, in 1938 Evans chose to caption the photograph "Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife." A standard practice for Evans and other FSA photographers, the vocational label marked Burroughs's visage as a generic type rather than as an individual portrait. Furthermore, while Evans's documentary technique differs in many respects from van Gogh's early drawings in Belgium and Holland, his approach demonstrates marked similarities to the painter's later, French portraiture, including his 1888 portrait of Patience Escalier.

#### **Portrait of Patience Escalier (F 444) and "Alabama Tenant Farmer"**

The direct gaze and expression of sorrowful reserve evident in both "Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife," and "Alabama Tenant Farmer" [Floyd Burroughs], for example,

closely resembles the gaze and expression of Van Gogh's portrait of Escalier, a shepherd in the French provinces. Most of Evans's tenant farmer portraits offer similar visions of men and women reacting to the camera—and, by implication, to the painful circumstances of their lives—with a restrained, melancholy dignity.

### **Portrait of an Actor (F 533) and "Landowner"**

While van Gogh and Evans responded to their working-class models with a similar combination of pity, respect, and distance, complex similarities are also evident in their figuration of the provincial bourgeoisie. Like the agricultural workers considered above, van Gogh and Evans treated the models pictured in Portrait of an Actor and "Landowner" as emblematic of their type or class. In their original contexts, both images were identified by a profession rather than by name. This generalizing was typical practice for the later van Gogh; most of the 49 portraits painted in Arles are presented as icons or emblems of social roles (e.g. shepherd, soldier, lover, and postal worker). These roles "seem like those of stock characters in a social primer or an encyclopédie, and, taken together, they constitute a social panorama of Provençal citizens" (Zemel, Van Gogh's Progress 88). As noted earlier, Evans's documentary portraiture demonstrates a similar technique. The exhibition captions and catalog for American Photographs included no proper names, for example. Instead, like "Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife," the photographs are designated by social roles: "American Legionnaire," "Cuban Ship Loader," "Flood Refugee," and "Main Street Faces."

In conflict with their generic labels, however, the authority ascribed to the tradition of portraiture gives compositions like Portrait of an Actor and "Landowner" an

individualist aura. In addition, both of these visions of bourgeois provinciality mix conflicting signs of authority and disrespect. The haughty stare and cravat of the Portrait of an Actor, for example, are undermined by van Gogh's treatment of both the suit and face. The suit is dashed off in bold, simplified lines that suggest the cartoon-like forms of caricature, while the fleshy features of the actor's face are subtly distorted and incomplete. A viewer could easily conclude that the hauteur is the result of theatrics, or wine, or both. In a similar manner, the Landowner's square stance and direct, faintly hostile stare combine with the suit and necktie to suggest economic and social authority. At the same time, these marks are rendered vaguely ridiculous: the man's slumped posture, rumpled, poorly fitting suit, and equivocal gaze all undercut the figure's claim to authority.

#### **La Berceuse (F 504) and "Butcher Sign, Mississippi"**

The most comprehensive influence Evans took from van Gogh, however, is not manifest in any particular painting or photograph. Instead, it lies in the two artists' extended, patchwork blending of vernacular, mass, and modernist artistic styles. Like Portrait of an Actor, for example, van Gogh's La Berceuse combines a flamboyantly modernist palette with the bold outlines and flattened, simplified forms of vernacular art. As my analysis of Jewell, Alexander, and Benson demonstrated, 1930s audiences read van Gogh's use of vernacular form as a sign of the painter's identification with his rural and provincial models. At the same time, however, the color of La Berceuse incorporated discordant references. In a letter to Theo, Van Gogh compared the canvas to "a chromolithograph from a cheap shop," thereby claiming the populist appeal of brightly colored, inexpensive, mass-manufactured art. MOMA paired the canvas with this



quotation, and the museum argued that these aspects of the painter's art signified both van Gogh's modernism and his populism: "For it is only recently that his gay, decorative, exaggerated color, his tortured drawing, his flat, unconventional perspective and the direct and passionate emotionalism have attracted rather than repelled the general public" ("122735-43" 2).

Like van Gogh, Evans constructed an avant-garde pictorial practice that appropriated the forms of vernacular and mass-cultural figuration. In both oeuvres, these traditions are transformed through incorporation into a body of work marked as resolutely modernist. The composition of the figure and chair in La Berceuse, for example, resembles the bold lines and flat planes rendered by Evans's "Butcher Sign, Mississippi." This photograph is one example of Evans's deliberate search for the remnants of self-taught, vernacular painting and architecture. In his FSA documentary work, Evans combined these folk forms with a photographic practice that resonated with modernity:

The word modern in its truest sense aptly characterizes Mr. Evans' work as it is 'straight' photography, so factual that it may almost be called functional. Its insistence is upon the utmost clarity and detail of the image. Combined with this technical skill is Walker Evans' genius for composition. ("For Release" 2)

Evans's compositional genius established its modernism in at least two ways. It was, first of all, "anti-graphic." A reviewer applied this label to Evans's 1935 exhibition at Julian Levy's gallery in New York, and it was taken up by Lincoln Kirstein's article in American Photographs (Devree 7; Kirstein 192). The phrase suggested that the camera's mechanical nature allowed its operators to break free from the stifling weight of the painterly tradition. As machine, the camera could reveal ways of seeing different from—and more in tune with modernity than—images created by the human hand. Evans's

photographs jolted viewers out of their visual complacency through the "shock-value" of unexpected angles of vision and juxtapositions of objects. But despite the shock, the photographs presented their subject matter as "still real and without distortion" (Devree 7).

This aura of realism and lack of distortion resulted from Evans's deliberate choice of rectilinear angles, repetitive imagery, and geometric form. The photographer's preferred tool was an architectural camera that allowed him to correct for optical distortion. The results are evident in photographs like "Negro Church, South Carolina, 1936," whose ruler-straight lines were more regular than those that would be seen even by the eye of a human observer standing in front of the church. Evans composed dozens of such images; their repetition, regularity, and linearity signified an inhuman clarity of vision that resonated with a functionalist and utilitarian, "machine-age" modernism.

Evans's practice also claimed the mantle of modernism through a surrealist juxtaposition of disparate objects. Notably, these juxtapositions often achieved a dissonance similar to the combination of vernacular craftsmanship and mechanical precision evident in his architectural photographs. His "Interior, West Virginia Coal Miner's House," for example, brought together the curvilinear arcs of a hand-made rocking chair with the machine-cut angles and photo-realism of advertising signage. Evans was particularly drawn to such combinations of mass culture and folk craftsmanship, but the trope is widespread throughout the period's documentary photography. The FSA photographic file in particular is filled with similar composites of folk, mass, and modernist iconography, suggesting the contemporary power of such conjunctions. As James Guimond has observed, such images expressed "the strange

mixtures of times, activities, and cultural influences that mingled and jostled with one another in the FSA photographers' America" (134). More than simply as "strange mixtures," however, the readings of Evans's photography considered below suggest that these combinations offered the photography both the imprimatur of modernity and the continuity marshaled by reference to a specifically American cultural tradition.<sup>7</sup>

These discordant combinations of visual styles—vernacular, mass-cultural, and high-art modernism—fueled the Depression-era impact of both van Gogh's art and Evans's documentary photography. Both the paintings and the photographs appealed simultaneously to nostalgia for a mythic past and an embattled faith in a better future. For thirties audiences, however, one fundamental difference distinguished van Gogh from documentary photography. Van Gogh signified the past in two ways: his modernism was that of a previous generation, and his folk models were the peasants and townspeople of a distant place and time. The objects of Evans's camera, on the other hand, were understood to be very much alive, living and working in the cotton-growing regions of the southern United States. By mobilizing the visual tropes of Vincent van Gogh in documentary photography, in other words, Evans created complex and contradictory modern emblems: real pictures of disintegration and desperate need, which simultaneously figured a politically resonant, utopian hopefulness.

The best record of this complexity lies in the text that has become the privileged gloss on Evans's Depression-era practice: the 481 pages of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, written by James Agee as a complement to Evans's documentary portrait of three

---

<sup>7</sup> On the "American-ness" of American Photographs, see Trachtenberg (231-85).

rural families in Alabama. In early 1936, Agee recruited Evans for this documentary project on sharecropping in the American South. The FSA agreed to free Evans for the assignment, and that summer he and Agee traveled to Alabama, located three "representative" families, lived with and near these families for three weeks, and then returned to New York. Although not published until 1941, Agee's final version of the experience offers the best source for consideration of the textual and conceptual environment in which Evans worked. Agee's brilliant and difficult contribution to Praise is important in its own right, but a full treatment is beyond the scope of the argument here.<sup>8</sup> As a frame for Evans's image-making, however, Agee's text demonstrates that the van Gogh phenomenon deeply marked the contextual environment surrounding Evans's praxis.

Like Agee and Evans in 1936, van Gogh sought out and created images that emphasized the back-breaking effort, humility, and everyday hardships of agricultural workers. Van Gogh's letters invested this project with a moral fervor, and this closely parallels the tone and emphasis of Agee's textual contribution to Praise. For example, the following quotation appeared as the epigraph to Dear Theo, the best-selling collection of van Gogh's letters published in 1937:

The figure of a labourer—some furrows in a ploughed field—a bit of sand, sea and sky—are serious subjects, so difficult, but at the same time so beautiful, that it is indeed worth while to devote one's life to the task of expressing the poetry hidden in them.

---

<sup>8</sup> For a more extensive account of Agee's text, see Spence, The Politics of Representation in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

It is difficult to imagine a better epigraph for Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, published four years later. Notably, the context of van Gogh's assertion emphasizes its embattled, insistent tone. The quotation is taken from a passage in which the artist stresses to his brother that their parents may never recognize the value of his life's career (Dear Theo 173). Van Gogh's tone and his characterization of his subject matter—difficult, beautiful, and, above all, serious—echo throughout Agee's prose, and these are only the first of dozens of close textual parallels. Throughout Praise, Agee combines this passion with a painter's concentration on form and color, and this obsessive attention to sensory detail gives the text its most distinctive trope. A passage from another of van Gogh's letters, also published in the 1937 Dear Theo, offers a representative analogue:

The people here instinctively wear the most beautiful blue that I have ever seen. It is coarse linen which they weave themselves, warp black, woof blue, the result of which is a black-and-blue-striped pattern. When this fades, and becomes somewhat discoloured by wind and weather, it is an infinitely quiet, delicate tone which just brings out the flesh colours. (336)

Compare this to Agee's lyrical description of the structure and tone of the tenant farmers' denim overalls:

[Through hard use, the] whole shape, texture, color, finally substance, all are changed. The shape, particularly along the urgent frontage of the thighs, so that the whole structure of the knee and musculature of the thigh is sculptured there;....The texture and the color change in union, by sweat, sun, laundering....into a region and scale of blues, subtle, delicious, and deft beyond what I have seen elsewhere approached except in rare skies, the smoky light some days are filmed with, and some of the blues of Cézanne. (267)

This excerpt comes from Agee's four-page description of overalls, part of a 30-page chapter called "Clothing." The explicit reference to Cézanne should not obscure the great debt Agee's prose owes to that of another Post-Impressionist. The most

characteristic tropes in Agee's text—an artist's attention to sensory detail, infused with a deeply Christian, passionately expressed preference for the realities of the working poor—these Agee found in van Gogh's letters.

From the van Gogh phenomenon that exploded simultaneously with its composition, Agee's text took a final, compelling, and cautionary tale. Praise's rhetorical framework is structured by its reaction to the commercial frenzy for van Gogh's images and words. Although Agee's prose is clearly literary in its roots and aspirations, the text repeatedly expresses anxiety about Praise's likely reception:

Above all else: in God's name don't think of it as Art.

Every fury on earth has been absorbed in time, as art, or as religion, or as authority in one form or another. . . . Official acceptance is the one unmistakable symptom that salvation is beaten again, and is the one surest sign of fatal misunderstanding, and is the kiss of Judas. (15)

The blending of Christian and artistic themes here once again recalls van Gogh, but the text's disavowal of art does not. The trope marks a distinguishing element in Praise's rhetoric, one articulated in reaction to the mass-cultural assimilation of van Gogh and other representatives of "high art":

[P]eople hear Beethoven in concert halls, or over a bridge game, or to relax; Cezannes are hung on walls, reproduced, in natural wood frames; van Gogh is the man who cut off his ear and whose yellows became recently popular in window decoration...Kafka is a fad; Blake is in the Modern Library.... (14).

This reaction against the mass-cultural absorption of texts and traditions from the high arts haunts Agee's contribution to Praise. It is worth stressing, again, that in the years Agee's text took shape, this conjunction was most apparent in the mainstream fascination with van Gogh. Praise's disgust with the "castration" of great artists—"one by one, you

have absorbed and have captured and dishonored, and you have distilled of your deliverers the most ruinous of all your poisons"—recalls the New Masses reviewer's contempt for the bourgeois audiences of the van Gogh exhibition: "What perversion of history and the meaning of a great artist. What bitter irony" (Agee 14; Alexander 29). Alexander reacted by claiming van Gogh for revolutionary art, arguing that the artists aligned with the Communist Party continued van Gogh's search for truth "in a more organized, clear, and conscious manner" (30). Agee reacted by creating Praise's text—a work of dense, heterogeneous, and difficult prose, clearly indebted to modernist formal experimentation, yet one that insistently disavowed the label "art."

American literary critics have been slow to recognize that Agee's rejection of the category "art" is itself a characteristic trope of many kinds of modernism. Because the various movements of the historical avant garde occupy a more secure niche in the art historical canon, it is not surprising that an art historian first made this point in relation to Agee's text. Identifying the rhetoric of a socially conscious, utilitarian modernism within Praise, Margaret Olin argues that the book can best be read as a site of interchange between "two modernist discursive modes," documentary and "hermetic art" (92). Although Olin does not pursue the point, this combination closely resembles the radical formalism that characterized avant garde movements like Soviet Constructivism: an outwardly focused, socially engaged artistic praxis that aligned formalist experimentation with social revolution. Nor was this resemblance as distant as it might at first appear. In a short list of artistic influences cited in 1938, Time magazine aligned Evans with the Constructivist filmmaker Dziga Vertov ("Recorded Time" 43).

Like the Constructivists, in 1937 Agee defined modern art as the linkage of formal experimentation and radical politics: "[A]ny new light on anything, if the light has integrity, is a revolution" ("Art for What's Sake" 48). Continuing the optical metaphor, Agee argued that a strictly Marxian lens was limited, and, moreover, "a willingness to use and still more to try to invent or perfect still other lenses may well become all but obligatory and can in any case scarcely avoid being useful" (48). In Praise, published four years later, the metaphors of light and lenses became explicitly photographic.

For in the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, for him who can discern it, and centrally and simply, without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands....This is why the camera seems to me, next to unassisted and weaponless consciousness, the central instrument of our time. (11)

In Praise, then, the camera becomes the central instrument of Agee's attempt to forge nothing less than a radically new way of seeing and knowing. In characterizing artistic practice, Agee's text tends to use a masculine language of expression and penetration (Jones, "Work of Gender" 7-8). In the passage above, the tropes are reversed; the camera is aligned with an "unassisted and weaponless consciousness," suggesting a receptive, open subjectivity able to comprehend the "immediate world"—to intuit, that is, an unmediated knowledge of alterity and otherness, to transcend the subject-object division on which Western philosophy was founded. Although in this passage the text distinguishes the camera from both art and science, the analogies are notably unstable. While Agee's text generally compares its own imaginative, expressive prose to Romantic artists like Blake and Beethoven, it also consistently aligns Evans's camera with science:

One reason I care so deeply about the camera is just this. So far as it goes...and handled cleanly and literally in its own terms, as an ice-cold,



some ways limited, some ways more capable, eye, it is, like the phonograph record and like scientific instruments and unlike any other leverage of art, incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth. (234)

Both this passage's passionate advocacy and its repetitive qualifications are characteristic of Agee's references to the camera. The anxieties expressed about the reception of great artists like van Gogh are equally apparent in Agee's discussion of photography. Though its misuse, Agee complains, this "central instrument of our time" has spread a "nearly universal...corruption of sight" (11).

These perceived limits of science and art, photography and the printed word, are the motivation for the text's obsessive return to the language and example of van Gogh. Responding to the author's own experiences in Alabama and to Evans's photographic portrayals of it, Agee's text effectively transcodes the structure of van Gogh's early and late periods—empathetic, suffering realism counterpoised with an ecstatic, transcendent idealism—into the dialectical oppositions that mark Praise. Agee reaches toward a particular blending of science and art, combining the objective realism of the camera and the visionary Christian humanism he associates with art. Van Gogh—among the few canonized modernists to incorporate Christian themes—infused the second valence. In its final form, Agee's agonized, expressive prose—paired with the products of Evans's dispassionate, "transparent" camera—are imagined to eclipse and complete the felt opposition between art and science. Agee's hoped-for reconciliation would combine the inhuman clarity of the camera with the warm empathy of Christian humanism. Van Gogh's visionary personality, in other words, would come to inhabit the "central instrument" of the future.

Since its re-printing in 1960, Agee's reading of Evans's Depression-era photography has proven massively influential. Before the new edition of Praise appeared, however, Evans's reputation depended most on American Photographs, the single-artist exhibition and catalog presented in 1938 by the Museum of Modern Art. This catalog carried another complicated valuation of Evans's photography, by Lincoln Kirstein, another of Evans's friends and collaborators. Like Agee, Kirstein made the case for Evans's photography by weaving a tangled skein of assertions about art, science, and religion. Like Agee's text, Kirstein distinguished Evans's "mechanical" camera from the imaginative arts. And finally, like Agee, Kirstein made enormous claims for Evans's photographs on precisely that ground:

[C]ompare this vision of a continent as it is, not as it might be or as it was, with any other coherent vision that we have had since the [Civil] war. What poet has said as much? What painter has shown as much? (193)

Kirstein argued that contemporary literature and painting had abdicated their social roles. As a result,

It is for [the photographer] to fix and to show the whole aspect of our society, the sober portrait of its stratifications, their backgrounds and embattled contrasts. It is the camera that today reveals our disasters and our claims to divinity, doing what painting and poetry used to do and, we can only hope, will do again. (192)

Kirstein framed this coronation of the camera by first dismissing two influential streams of photographic practice. Distinguishing Evans's photography from both false art and false fact, Kirstein rejected both pictorialist and candid-camera photography. The "old fashioned 'artistic' soft-focus photographers"—the pictorialist tradition of the teens and twenties—were kitsch pretenders to art who "spawned probably the most odious and humorous objects in the lexicon of our disdain" (190). Worse yet, because more

contemporary, were the false truths of tabloid journalism's candid camera: "It drugs the eye into believing it has witnessed a significant fact when it has only caught a flicker not clear enough to indicate a psychological image, however solid the material one" (191). As this distinction suggests, Kirstein's valuation will depend on Evans's blending of the material photographic image with the mental images of human perception.

In opposition to these misuses of the camera, Kirstein first champions the photographic masters of the nineteenth century, in whom he discovers "a simple but overwhelming interest in the object which was set before his machine" [emphasis in original] (190). Kirstein takes this objectivist approach to its logical extreme, claiming that the photography of Nadar, Cameron, Hill, Brady, "and the nameless artists of their kind," "whatever its date or authorship, [seems] the work of the same man done at the same time, or even, perhaps, the creation of the unaided machine" (191). This inhuman clarity of vision is the ancestry Kirstein constructs for Evans's photography. At the same time, however, Kirstein envisions a camera that is somehow both objective machine and humane, artistic subject. Soon after he states that the best photography seems to result from an autonomous camera, Kirstein claims, "In this spirit, photographs were taken which come close to great art on any critical basis" (190). He also traces Evans lineage to T.S. Eliot and "the great French realist poets": Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Apollinaire, and Cocteau. And, Kirstein claims, "Although the camera is a machine and photography a science, a large element of human judgment comes into the process, amounting to creative selection. For lack of a better term we can call this the photographer's eye, his personal vision or unique attitude" (189-90).

As in Agee's text, this ongoing conflict between machinery and poetry, objective realism and uniquely personal vision, is neither dismissed nor resolved. Instead, in the long passage reproduced below, Kirstein claims that these contradictions themselves are the link between the photographer and the objects of his vision. Kirstein discovers the essence of Evans's avant-garde modernism, his objective/subjective machine-artistry, in his photography's juxtapositions of vernacular and mass-cultural forms:

The wave-length of his vision is exactly equaled by the radiation of the images which attract and repel it. The eye of Evans is open the visible effects, direct and indirect, of the industrial revolution in America, the replacement by the machine in all its complexities of the work and art once done by individual hands and hearts, the exploitation of men by machinery and machinery by men. He records alike the vulgarization which inevitably results from the widespread multiplication of goods and services, and the naïve creative spirit, imperishable and inherent in ordinary man. (194)

In a dialectical reversal, Kirstein here makes over mass-cultural artifacts into signs of a fallen era, while vernacular crafts become symbols of a living creative spirit. Evans's juxtapositions are both diagnosis and prescription: "records of the age before an imminent collapse," and "serious symbols allied in disparate chaos" (196). As such, the photographs become "living citations of the Hegelian theory of opposites," and the photographer's human/machine "eye" accomplishes this reversal and synthesis. His camera transcends the naïve purity of vernacular art, incorporating it into a modernist art of "intention, logic, continuity, climax, sense and perfection" (193). His photographs salvage "whatever was splendid" from the ruin of the present, "for the future reference of the survivors" (196).

These complex imbrications of agricultural and consumer culture, past, present, and future, vernacular, mass, and modernist traditions, underlay the era's fascination with the nation's rural population and countryside. Documentary photography aroused great

passion during the Depression because it provided a stage for a bitter political and cultural struggle over the requisites of modernity. What is striking about thirties readings of Evans's photography is their explicit partisanship, particularly when compared to recent interpretations of the photographer as somehow blithely indifferent to the political warfare waged through his imagery. Kirstein, for example, claimed in 1938 that Evans's attitude was that of "a member revolting from his own class" (197). The photographer Ansel Adams made a similar point in a different way: "[American Photographs] gave me a hernia. I am so goddam mad over what people think America is from the left tier" (qtd. in Lynes 158). While Adams's photography celebrated the nation's natural beauty, Evans recorded its social schizophrenia. Moreover, despite Evans's "anti-graphic" preference for the iconography of poverty and decay, his Depression-era defenders made frequent references to high art, usually in support of the photographer's moral authority. For example, a review of the American Photographs exhibition in Los Angeles discovered in Evans a clarity and compassion reminiscent of Rembrandt: "[T]here are people who will insist that we should not look at poverty or starvation or frustration because these are too ugly. It was said of Rembrandt too" (Millier). Documentary photography's blending of "historical documents" and "works of art," in other words, served as a weapon in hard-fought battles over the proper role of government in addressing the poverty, starvation, and frustration caused by the Great Depression.

Because the American South played a crucial role in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal coalition—and because the South was Walker Evans's chosen terrain—his particular combinations of modernist, mass cultural, and vernacular forms took on a compelling political edge. In 1938, after eight years of debilitating economic crisis and six years as

president, Roosevelt declared the American South to be "the Nation's No. 1 economic problem." Southern poverty fed conditions that held the entire nation in the grips of Depression, Roosevelt argued, and the president charged one of the New Deal's public relations arms, the National Emergency Council, to prepare a brief, persuasive tract that would make his case for change. At the time, per capita income in the wealthiest Southern state ranked below that of the poorest state outside the region. Millions of southerners lived on the edge of starvation, and southern tenant farmers—66 percent white, 34 percent black—were the poorest of the poor, often enduring lives of abject misery. Seeking an image that would resonate with a public that must be moved to action, the Council drew a remarkable parallel. Many of the South's tenant farmers, the Report on Economic Conditions of the South noted, are "living in poverty comparable to that of the poorest peasants in Europe."<sup>9</sup>

There can be no doubt which images of European peasantry came to mind first in 1938. These were images whose sympathy and accuracy were ensured by their creator's moral authority, grounded in Vincent van Gogh's Christ-like image of suffering and self-sacrifice. They were also images with powerful political resonance. Locating European peasantry on American soil challenged the centuries-old Jeffersonian ideal of citizen-farmers, a keystone of arguments made by the New Deal's many southern opponents. In appeals that resonated with broad streams of American ideology, southerners led by the Vanderbilt Agrarians posited agricultural society as a fertile, arcadian space that sustained

---

<sup>9</sup> Report on Economic Conditions of the South: 1.8 million farmers (46); "the Nation's No. 1 economic problem," (1); rankings by per capita income (21); percentage of tenants

both material abundance and a democratic, classless society. The equation of southern tenant farmers and European peasants argued, in contrast, that Southern agriculture perpetuated a rigid caste system that chained farmers to lives of poverty and exploitation.

The widespread dispersion of van Gogh's imagery helped sustain the Report's vision of small farmers as decent, admirable, and hard-working laborers trapped in a vicious cycle by economic "lords" of the North and South. Van Gogh helped underscore the Report's portrait of southern society as brutalizing and pathological, but the allusion accomplished a further task as well. For audiences in the 1930s, Van Gogh's imagery combined earthy populism with brilliant modernism—his evocations of an agricultural folk stood alongside a dazzling riot of color, resonant with the vitality of a redeemed modernity. In the New Deal's showcase approach to southern rehabilitation, similar juxtapositions proved quite valuable. Historians analyzing the intellectual roots of the Emergency Council's Report noted that it

echoed a broader concern of Depression-era America—that a harsh imbalance had arisen between urban-industrial and rural America that was economically and spiritually poisoning both. While some groups, such as the Vanderbilt Agrarians, called for a return to the land, many others, both within and outside the South, sought a synthesis between agricultural and industrial life, calling for decentralized manufacturing closely tied to rural productions, frequently organized as cooperative enterprises. This organic vision, of a close-knit, economically interdependent community of human scale, was prominent in...the approach of the early TVA. (Carlton and Coclans 17)

In a recent book on the Tennessee Valley Authority's public imagery, Walter Creese has argued persuasively that the South was the preferred stage for New Deal visions of a redeemed, reconciled future precisely because of its dual image as an

---

by race (46); comparison to European peasants (22).

agricultural oasis and stagnant backwater.<sup>10</sup> Both layers of meaning resonated with thirties audiences, as the U.S. population struggled to align its understandings of the nation's past with competing visions of its future. Like the side-by-side pairings of van Gogh's early and late periods, the TVA's massive dams and planned communities created dramatic, visual conjunctions of grounded past and breathtaking future:

The desire for a bright new order grew intense....The TVA would offer an unparalleled spectacle of technological skill and abundance, fitted right over abject poverty....while reveling in the turmoil produced by the abrupt juxtaposition of two value systems. (Creese 148)

The TVA constructed a powerful dream—a vision that bridged the gaps separating hardscrabble, present-day realities from both an idealized past and a utopian future. In the Authority's arcadian spectacles, Americans discovered visions of a modern civilization redeemed by a synthesis of opposites. This bipolar system closely resembles the ideological framework constructed by the texts considered in this chapter. In the enchanted middle position appeared the Christ-like passion of Vincent van Gogh, the magical camera-eye of Walker Evans, and the planned, utopian communities of the New Deal's TVA. In chapter 4, I will consider another, influential example of such montage logic, which linked the mythography of commercial advertising to the imagery of another 1930s innovation, the photojournalism of the new picture magazines.

---

<sup>10</sup> The literature on the TVA is enormous, and I make no pretense of covering it here. In addition to Creese, Hargrove and Conklin provide a useful overview.



CHAPTER 4  
REALISM, SURREALISM, AND ADVERTISING:  
LIFE MAGAZINE AND FAULKNER'S IF I FORGET THEE, JERUSALEM

The second half of this chapter offers a new reading of William Faulkner's 1939 novel If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem. By re-placing Jerusalem within the cultural context that shaped its creation, I demonstrate that the novel's content and peculiar form represent a direct response to two mass-cultural phenomena of the middle and late 1930s: the dramatic successes of new weekly picture magazines—including Life, Look, and a dozen competitors—and the decisive influence of Surrealism, the French avant garde movement that became suddenly fashionable in the years leading up to World War II. Both the picture magazines and Surrealism achieved an abrupt, often disturbing influence within American culture in these years, and I demonstrate below that Jerusalem's twin plot lines and dichotomous structure manifest Faulkner's attempt to turn their distinctive attributes toward cultural critique.

My reading of Faulkner is guided, however, by a larger project, which I hope will contribute to a clearer understanding of public discourse in the 1930s and the role that photographic culture played in shaping it. The first half of this chapter focuses, therefore, on the kinship between modern print advertising—an explicitly fictitious and idealized body of texts—and those most persuasive of thirties facts: the journalistic and documentary record compiled by the decade's artists, authors, government agencies, and mass media. In short, I will argue that William Stott's influential characterization of the

1930s—as a decade dominated by "documentary expression"—was only half right. Instead, the clearest picture of public discourse in the thirties can be found in the tensions between the discursive systems of advertising and journalistic realism, within mass-media texts like the picture magazines, which juxtaposed the utopian dreams of advertising fantasy with the scientific authority of photojournalism and documentary.

Both advertising and journalism achieved their modern forms in the late 1930s, in large part because the camera assumed a central place within both discourses. Both have also received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Too often, though, these texts have been treated separately, resulting in the neglect of a crucial, dialectical interaction. Both advertising and photo-realism found their most compelling form in combination with one another, within heterogeneous systems like those created by Life, the nation's first weekly picture magazine and soon the most widely read periodical in U.S. history. Unlike, for example, the literary symbol—an object that claimed to unify within itself both an ideal and a particular truth—Life marshaled its persuasive force through a form closer to allegory, linking the ideal and the profane while maintaining their distinction. As readers paged through individual issues of Life, they encountered a set of ongoing intersections: a disparate stream of images that evoked fantasy, wholeness, and the fulfillment of desire (feature and advertising photography), inter-cut with a

---

<sup>1</sup> Stott's groundbreaking study remains the most authoritative examination of the 1930s documentary movements in the United States. Helpful reevaluations of the tradition from post-structuralist and cultural studies standpoints include Tagg, Trachtenberg, Reed, Rabinowitz, and Natanson. The best analysis of the era's advertising is Roland Marchand's Advertising the American Dream, but essays by Sally Stein and Jackson Lears provide valuable insights as well.

parallel stream that continually invoked the real, the fragmentary, and, often, the traumatic (photo-realism). Aligned but separate, advertising and photo-realism traveled together, suggesting reconciliations that were immediately and continuously deferred. In dialectical terminology, then, Life's appeal may be framed as a continuously anticipated synthesis of antitheticals; as a contradictory whole, Life promised to make the fictitious utopias of advertising real, to bring heaven to earth, to heal the divisions within and between the human subject and its object-world.

These promises made Life one of the twentieth century's most influential institutions, with few peers in the shaping force it exerted on the form and content of U.S. public discourse. This chapter analyzes the early effects of the magazine by focusing on Life's visualization of a particular historical event—the winter 1937 flood of the Ohio River Valley. A close reading of the magazine's flood coverage demonstrates that Life's promised synthesis became most visible at the boundaries separating advertising idealism and photojournalistic realism, within two of the magazine's most fantastic figures. The first, the object-as-subject, was none other than the Marxian commodity fetish—the material object that took on the magical, animate powers of its human creators. The second, the subject-as-object, appeared in the guise of the Modern Woman—an icon that often appeared in Life's pages as a contradictory combination of viewing subject and viewed object. Like the constructions of femininity considered in chapter 2, in other words, Life's images of women became a privileged ground for the projection of the fantasies and fears of the men who produced the magazine's editorial and advertising sections. And, as a result, the historical figure and media icon Margaret Bourke-White once again occupies a prominent place in this chapter's argument. As she had with

Fortune, Bourke-White joined Life's staff before the magazine began publication, and she once again quickly consolidated her position as Life's marquee photographer. In addition to extraordinary talent, Bourke-White brought to the new magazine an internationally famous persona, and Time Inc. soon made this daring and glamorous image a prime instrument of Life's promotion (Goldberg 195).

Chapter 4 combines, then, lines of inquiry opened in chapter 2—which analyzed Fortune's images of women—and chapter 3, which foregrounded the complex combinations of documentary, artistic, and mass-cultural figuration evident in the photography of Walker Evans. As Lincoln Kirstein pointed out in 1938, Evans's juxtapositions should be read as more than coincidence or simple irony. They were, instead, attempts to picture a new social order taking shape within the wreckage of the present, salvaging "whatever was splendid" from the current disaster "for the future reference of the survivors" (196). Photo-realism's relationships with advertising will be this chapter's focus, and the important point here is that Evans's fascination with commercial signage, trademarks, posters, and billboards was not unique. Evans's gravitation toward these objects reflected a widespread documentary practice, and many of the period's photographers demonstrated similar attractions.

Such juxtapositions are often called "surreal," and the designation is more fitting than is often realized. In 1938, for example, Kirstein also aligned Evans with a number of Surrealists and their precursors, including Eugène Atget, Arthur Rimbaud, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Salvador Dali. As these comparisons begin to suggest, American documentary photography often resembled the work of the artists and authors congregating around the Parisian Centrale Surréaliste from the middle twenties through

the middle thirties. French Surrealism responded to the dizzying explosion of modern image-making, and it offered American photographers a formal system that could articulate the myriad "chance encounters" of photo-realism and advertising discovered within their changing cultural landscape. As a result, a surrealist discourse partially imported from France gained broad currency in Depression-era America, and it did so because Surrealism could reveal that such combinations of polarized discourses formed meta-textual systems with meanings greater than the sum of their parts. Before tracing Surrealism's broader influence within American culture during the middle and late 1930s, however, I will first consider a more concrete example of its effects.

More than most, Margaret Bourke-White occupied the fault line of this advertising/photo-realist dichotomy. In 1936, after five years spent dividing her career between staff work for Fortune and commercial photography for clients like Goodyear and Buick, Bourke-White closed her Manhattan studio and devoted herself full-time to groundwork for Life, slated to begin publication at the end of the year (Goldberg 136). In the interim, the photographer carved out time to tour the American South with the novelist and playwright Erskine Caldwell, collaborating on a book-length documentary account of Southern poverty. In her autobiography, Bourke-White wrote that during this period she had grown tired of advertising work: "I longed to see the real world...where things did not have to look convincing, they just had to be true" (112). She also recounted the disturbing sense of déjà vu that her documentary trip provoked:

As we penetrated the more destitute regions of the South, I was struck by the frequent reminders I found of the advertising world I thought I had left behind. Here the people really used the ads. They plastered them directly on their houses to keep the wind out. Some sharecropper shacks were

wrapped so snugly in huge billboard posters. . .that the home itself disappeared from sight. The effect was bizarre.

And inside, the effect was equally unexpected. The walls from floor to ceiling were papered in old newspapers and colorful advertising pages torn from magazines. . . I had the uneasy feeling that if I explored around enough, I would find advertisements I had done myself. (127-28)

Destitute Southerners were using the new blizzard of print media as decoration and insulation, and in several photographs made that summer Bourke-White experimented with the disturbing force marshaled by this combination of rural poverty and mass-media fantasy. In a photograph taken in East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, for example, she used a doorway as an internal frame, locating the pictured child within a matrix of bright feature stories and sales pitches. Among other things, this positioning can be read as an interrogation of the role played by documentary photography within a society increasingly built on commodity spectacle; the photograph's framing prefigured the eventual appearance of this child's image within the pages of a magazine like Life. Bourke-White's "uneasy feeling," recorded years later, stemmed from a kind of uncanny homecoming. In flight from the artifice of Madison Avenue to the gritty realism of documentary, Bourke-White re-discovered advertising's weightless dream transformed suddenly into the wallpaper of an ongoing nightmare. The "real world" beyond her Manhattan studio revealed itself in spaces whose every square inch repeated parodies of mass-mediated fantasy. Bourke-White's uncanny moment of recognition registered the close proximity of photo-realism and advertising—two emergent discourses, often presented as antithetical in meaning and effect, yet which both depended on the mass distribution and consumption of photographic imagery. It also suggested a flash of insight, a short circuiting of the distance separating myth and history, dream and reality.

Bourke-White's position within the developing apparatus of photographic culture, in other words, resulted in a moment of surrealist understanding, forcing an uneasy recognition of the connections linking these two opposed systems of photographic meaning. As I demonstrate below, Surrealism functioned in a similar manner for many artists, authors, and audiences in the late 1930s. As a result, attention to surrealist experience brings to light the ideological interactions linking photo-realism and advertising. As polar oppositions, these emergent discursive systems organized a shift in Americans' relationships to perceived reality. Furthermore, the career of Surrealism in the United States demonstrates that the congruencies mapped out in chapter 3—among documentary realism, high art, and mass culture—traveled in multiple directions. Not only were the mass-media discourses of advertising and photo-realism intertwined; both, in their intersections, also shaped the artistic practice of the period. William Faulkner's 1939 If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem, for example—the work of a novelist usually located at a far remove from Surrealism—responded to the same vectors of cultural force that came together in Bourke-White's photograph and, on a larger scale, in the picture magazine as a whole. All three of these textual practices—Bourke-White's documentary juxtaposition of rural poverty and modern advertising, Life's new "photojournalism," and If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem—attempted parallel tasks. On different scales and with different means, all were attempts to craft a coherent image of contemporary American society. In doing so, all drew on the formal structures of Surrealism, an avant garde movement that, quite suddenly, took on extraordinary influence in the United States.

Like the contemporaneous popularity of Vincent van Gogh, both the broad impact and the aura that surrounded Surrealism in these years can be traced to an exhibition

staged by a new American taste-maker: New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA).

In January 1937, a few weeks after the van Gogh exhibition's second New York installation closed, MOMA opened a major exhibition called "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism." Throughout its short history, the museum had been closely associated with the Rockefeller family; as a result, as one art historian put it, "The Modern, the Rockefellers, and New York City gave Surrealism an American cachet it had not previously enjoyed" (Tashjian 66). This cachet was soon exploited by the national media, led by the fashion press and the advertising industry. In 1938, one observer described the results:

Magazines slanted at luxury readers are polishing their pages with photographs and drawings which drip surrealist influence. Stores selling to the same group are dressing their windows in surrealist settings. Hairdressers are devising surrealist coiffures, and milliners are putting everything but mice and men on their hats. (Caspers 17)

As this passage suggests, Surrealism's influence first appeared in media and products aimed at the haute bourgeoisie, including ads for Gunther furs, Bonwit Teller storefronts, and a Schiaparelli perfume called "Shocking" (Caspers 19-20). Surrealistic imagery soon spread to broader markets. As late as 1943, an industry analyst could call the adoption of surrealist techniques "one of the most conspicuous trends in advertising today" (Erbes 22).

Though conceived in France as a revolutionary assault on the standards of middle-class morality and aesthetics, Surrealism's entrance into American culture overlaid this radicality with a complex of opposed connotations. As Dickran Tashjian put it in his history A Boatload of Madmen, in the United States, "Surrealism became the extreme instance of an avant-garde movement that entered the orbit of commercial



interests" (69). Tashjian presented this as a fall from grace, suggesting that the mass media appropriated Surrealism "in the service of fashion," sanitizing and de-politicizing the movement along the way: "What has endured to our day has been the legacy of media consumption of the avant-garde. Surrealism happened to be the first target" (331).

Surrealism could be legitimately called the second target, since the commercial exploitation of van Gogh had whetted media appetites for such modernist art "happenings." It is difficult, however, to argue with the main line of Tashjian's observation. The American media's appropriation of Surrealism dramatically altered the movement's meanings and significance. This narrative of co-optation and exploitation is complicated, however, by Surrealism's long attraction to the banality and sensationalism of mass culture. From its inception, Surrealism rejected "institution art" and in the process often embraced mass cultural practices.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the twenties and thirties, the French Surrealists and their fellow travelers created "not-art" from chamber pots and bottle racks (Marcel Duchamp), cast-offs and cultural trash (Max Ernst and Joseph Cornell); sought commissions from fashion magazines (Man Ray and Salvador Dali); celebrated decaying urban storefronts (Louis Aragon), "B" movies, and second-rate theaters (Andre Breton). This fascination included the artifacts of merchandising, advertising, and mass-publication, and Surrealism's entrance into the United States cemented this alignment.

---

<sup>2</sup> Both the term "institution art" and this view of the avant garde are developed in Peter Bürger's Theory of the Avant Garde.

In New York City's first major exhibition of Surrealism in 1931—alongside works by Dali, Ernst, Joan Miró, and other Europeans—gallery curator Julian Levy exhibited pages torn from the New York's tabloid newspapers, the Daily Mirror and Evening Graphic. These were to be taken as examples of surrealist Americana: a kind of primitivist version of the European avant garde (Tashjian 41). Five years after Surrealism made this first venture into the New York gallery system—and in the same year that MOMA displayed 48 of his canvases and objets de Surréalisme in its defining exhibition—the painter and sculptor Max Ernst published an origin myth that located his discovery of Surrealist collage within the pages of an illustrated catalog. As he leafed idly through pages of commercial illustration, Ernst wrote, he found himself mesmerized by the catalog's combinations of diverse iconography:

There I found brought together elements of figuration so remote that the sheer absurdity of that collection provoked a sudden intensification of the visionary faculties in me and brought forth an illusive succession of contradictory images, double, triple and multiple images, piling up on each other with the persistence and rapidity which are peculiar to love memories and the visions of half-sleep. (14)

This quotation condenses a number of Surrealism's defining tropes. Its references to dreams and love memories echoed the two sites privileged by Andre Breton in his second Surrealist Manifesto (1930). Its focus on uncanny juxtapositions recalled perhaps the most famous "definition" of Surrealist aesthetics, a line from the poet Lautréamont: "Beautiful . . . as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine with an umbrella" (qtd. in "History of Western Sculpture"). Most importantly, Ernst's anecdote located collage in an ambiguous space between subjective inspiration and the reflection of objective social conditions. In this anecdote Ernst portrayed himself as heroic

visionary, able to redeem "what had been before only some banal pages of advertising" (14). Yet he also wrote that the catalog's shifting combinations "provoked" and "brought forth" this flowing series of hallucinatory imagery. In other passages he emphasized this external agency, suggesting that the collage technique resulted from broader social forces: "I am tempted to see in collage. . .the culture of systematic displacement and its effects" (13). While the agency underlying collage's origin was ambiguous, Ernst's anecdote located it paradigmatically in the printed mass media. If by the late 1930s the American media had seized on Surrealism, the embrace had always extended both ways.

However, while the MOMA exhibition gave jarring juxtapositions and sensational imagery a certain mystique, the sudden prominence of this style in the U.S. media depended also on a more populist influence. In the same months that high-end retailers began adopting Surrealist figuration, a concurrent explosion of weekly picture magazines brought to tens of millions of new readers the formula that had long sustained urban tabloids like the Daily Mirror and Evening Graphic. Life's spectacularly successful launch in November 1936 sparked a dozen imitators—including Pic, Peek, See, Look, Foto, Focus, and Click—most of which embraced the strident, sensational style of their tabloid precursors. As a result, the picture weeklies soon gained the same tawdry aura that surrounded the tabloids. As the most established and reputable of the picture magazine publishers, however, Time Inc. took a different tack. Instead of appealing to pure sensationalism, the company used Time magazine's reputation for dispassionate, authoritative journalism to help distinguish Life as a sober and responsible "eye with a brain."

Because of this positioning, the inspired absurdities of Surrealism—its privileging of grotesquerie, hallucination, irrationality, and nonsense—might seem at first glance quite distant from both the broader documentary movement as a whole and Time Inc.'s photojournalism in particular. The truth-claims of the FSA documentary photography, for example, depended on a rhetoric of realist immediacy, a clarity of vision supported by an authoritative and empathetic gaze. Life's photojournalism designated a similar clarity of vision, guaranteed in this case by the lack of emotion of its distanced, objective, journalistic authority. Nevertheless, in this case appearances deceive; Surrealism was both integral to Life's formal structure and fundamental to its effect. Furthermore, it was Life's hybridity, more than its objective stance, that distinguished the magazine's presentations of reality from the more homogeneous texts of documentary realism. To demonstrate Life's submerged reliance on Surrealist structures of meaning, however, it is necessary first to trace the magazine's overt similarities to the concurrent documentary movement, particularly evident in Life's allegiance to the rhetoric of photo-realism.

Realism itself was under concerted attack in the 1930s, and not solely from the polemicists of the artistic avant garde. Among the official story-tellers of the Western democracies—historians, politicians, and journalists—the economic collapse provoked something very much like a crisis of narrative form. (John Tagg offers a useful articulation of this crisis in his Burden of Representation.) Like Fortune's parallel development of the "corporation story," the rise of what William Stott has called documentary expression can be best viewed as a response to a pervasive questioning of historical agency and representational authority. A useful example comes from John Grierson, the British filmmaker who in 1932 coined the term "documentary" to describe

non-fiction film. In response to the necessarily collective character of modern life, Grierson called for a new kind of film making, directly opposed to the individualist artifices of Hollywood. Instead of such fictional heroics, Grierson wrote, modern society demanded stories that focused on its collective institutions and mass movements:

You may think that individual life is no longer capable of cross-sectioning reality. You may believe that its particular belly-aches are of no consequence in a world in which complex and impersonal forces command, and conclude that the individual as a self-sufficient dramatic figure is outmoded. (103)

In that case, Grierson wrote, you will want films that reveal "the essentially co-operative or mass nature of society: leaving the individual to find his [sic] honours in the swoop of creative social forces" (103). Although Grierson's film units produced some of the finest examples of the genre now known as the classical documentary, it seems clear in retrospect that narratives of single individuals thrived in a world commanded by "complex and impersonal forces." While the Depression caused a brief downturn in attendance at American theaters, after 1932 a consolidated and standardized Hollywood cinema continued its unprecedented growth, establishing a narrative genre of extraordinary stability and influence (Robinson 178-79).

The crisis of individualist ideology to which Grierson reacted, however, was both real and pervasive. The collapse of capitalist institutions in Europe and North America—combined with the collectivist rhetoric of Soviet Russia, Fascist Italy, and Nazi Germany—shook the foundations of capitalist humanism. In the United States, the most visible reaction was Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal: a massive extension of executive power into areas of life formerly controlled by private individuals and private enterprise.

As did Grierson, the New Deal argued that the complexities of modern life demanded both a different understanding of historical agency and a new kind of storytelling. The economic debacle had proven, by this argument, that plans made by individuals were incapable of sustaining the American system. Instead, control of this system must be turned over to the collective, bureaucratic embodiment of many replaceable individuals. Here, for example, is the vision of Public Works Administration (PWA) for the 1.2 million square miles of the Mississippi River system: "As a democratic society develops a more complicated social-economic life, it becomes less capable of surviving uncertainty and drift; of surviving as democracy without continuing purpose, control, and authority" (United States, PWA 222). Social planning in the Valley, the PWA argued, should become the province of an overarching, "institutional mind":

Such a mind is a composite of, and yet is distinct from, the minds of the individuals of which it is composed, who, as individuals, may come and go; has a continuing life coincident with the life of the enterprise; and can think and arrange affairs with that large perspective possible only by such characteristics (222).

This superhuman mind presented itself, the PWA Report continued, as "the salvation of essential democracy" (222).

In the decades following the Great Depression, the New Deal's dramatic successes—in politics, economics, and warfare—rendered the bitter struggles of this period largely invisible. Only at century's end would federal institutions face a crisis of legitimacy similar to the battles that surrounded their enactment in the 1930s. In 1934, however, the PWA Report walked a tense line—drawn between inherited notions of individualist autonomy and the twentieth century's felt need for nationalist, bureaucratic authority.

To construct the mythology that would heal divisions between an older ideology of laissez faire individualism and a new ideology of collectivization, the Roosevelt administration turned with enormous success to the machinery of mass communication. The President himself, as Life noted in its first issue, was "a marvelous camera actor and not above demonstrating his art" (3). Roosevelt exploited radio's potential with similar brilliance, creating the "Fireside Chats" that have become a touchstone of that medium's history. The New Deal as a whole institutionalized mass communication as a vital function of governance, an approach which led directly to the formation of the FSA's extraordinary photographic corps. Even the PWA's Report became a part of this effort, serving as the basis for a classic example of Griersonian documentary film: The River (1937), directed by Pare Lorenz.

An FSA film released to nationwide theaters, The River constructed a new kind of American history. In the spirit of both Grierson and the PWA Report, the film ignored the stories of individual Americans, sweeping instead across the continent with a perspective resembling that of the institutional mind. This became most striking in the film's evocative use of "voice of God" narration. For example, as aerial and overhead shots of the flooding, leveed, and dammed Mississippi River played across the screen, the film's off-screen narrator intoned rolling lists of cities and towns within the river system. The trope melded 31 states and 1.2 million square miles into a single, aggregate mass. In American history as told by The River, the flood of 1937 served as a symbol of "our" mis-management of Valley's social-economic development.

An animated map of North America appeared in the final reel, ushering in the film's hero, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA): "The old River can be controlled. We

had the power to take the Valley apart. We have the power to put it back together again. In 1933 we started, down on the Tennessee river. . . ." The first-person "we" used throughout the film is here collapsed onto the collective agency of the TVA. The camera shifts from continental abstraction to monumental views of TVA dam sites, encouraging viewers to identify with the encompassing perspective of the camera and its guiding institutional mind.

This heroic federal Authority, with its expansive powers and institutional mind, was the protagonist of multiple stories told by the New Deal in diverse media and venues. This protagonist was a cousin to those envisioned by Fortune magazine, as both the federal agency and the multi-national corporation emerged to claim the superhuman perspective and authority necessary to make contemporary society work. In their displacement of the autonomous human subject from the center of narrative, both of these new genres were emphatically modern; both restructured historical agency from a perspective that Terry Eagleton has called "mythological thinking."

To recap Eagleton's point, considered in chapter 2's discussion of the Fortune's literature of business: a homology exists between modernist narrative and modern social theory, identified as "mythological thinking" because the human subject now experienced itself and its object-world as enigma. Like the ancient, mythic worlds in which human agents were the toys of fate, fortune, and destiny, modernity once again appeared to be commanded by forces beyond the power of human understanding. As the analysis above indicates, Eagleton's list of modern mythologies should be appended to include the PWA's Report and The River. The implacable powers these texts identified were those of industrial modernization, and they were simultaneously the river system itself. Only the



institutional mind appeared capable of negotiating this nature/culture complex and channeling its force. As the Report argued, "The time has passed when isolated or unrelated plans were adequate to American needs. When one strand in the interwoven web of our social fabric is touched every other strand vibrates. Land, water, and people go together" (3). Against the fascist Reich, the communist Party, and the capitalist Corporation, the New Deal proposed the federal Agency as the appropriate shepherd into the future.

### **Life's "Eye with a Brain"**

We may begin to uncover both the similarities and the profound differences between this documentary narrative and Time Inc.'s mass-mediated story-telling by comparing The River's version of the 1937 flood to the same event as portrayed by Life. Life's Feb. 8 issue devoted 19 pages to the flood, and the magazine continued the story with a five-page follow-up in its next weekly issue. The two-month-old magazine's coverage proved to be one of its most impressive early coups. These two stories, Life soon claimed, demonstrated the remarkable power of the new photojournalism: "Compared with the visualization of this year's flood, last year's flood was hardly seen at all. This forward-leap was mainly a credit to newspaper-picture-services. But only in LIFE was the full effect of this new reportage visible" (Time Inc. "Life and the News" 4). This "full effect" resulted in part from the scope of Life's new audience. Already avidly read by millions throughout the nation, Life provided the most comprehensive and authoritative picture of the flood until The River began playing in theaters several months later.

Like The River, Life's image of the flood emphasized aerial and overhead points of view. Half- and quarter-page photographs represented "Ohio, West Virginia, Indiana, Illinois," "Cincinnati, Cairo, Memphis," and captions highlighted these place-names, developing a rhythm, as readers turned the pages, that resembled the cadences of The River. The similarities extended to theme as well, as Life's coverage identified the federal government's 10-year, \$325 million flood control system as a resounding success. Just as The River looked to the TVA as the hope of the future, Life presented the Army Corps of Engineers as the hero of the present flood-control effort.

In other words, and despite obvious differences from government-sponsored texts like the Report and The River, Life presented a "New Deal reading" of the flood. This parallel manifests a deeper analogy between Time Inc.'s journalism and official New Deal documentary: Life sold itself in these years as a modern "eye with a brain" embodying the broad perspective and rationality characteristic of the PWA's "institutional mind." Notably, Time Inc.'s in-house advertising for Life returned repeatedly to the flood:

[B]etween the Flood of 1936 and the Flood of 1937, there was a ten-year advance in picture-journalism. . . .News-picture-services join with LIFE in promising that the next flood will be even more effectively visualized. And LIFE predicts that when a few more floods are properly reported by pictures, America will decide that there shall be no more floods. (Time Inc., "Life and the News" 5)

Such assertions of public spirit and revolutionary perspective should be treated with care. The advertising campaign was in part a defensive maneuver, responding to extensive criticism of Life and its fellow picture weeklies for sensationalism and prurience. A 1938 article titled "Picture Magazines and Morons," for example, excoriated Life and the other weeklies for lurid, tabloid-style reporting that debased both their

audience and the public sphere (J.L. Brown 404). Life's public-minded response to such criticism accurately reflected its 24 pages of flood coverage, but this self-promotion neglected the magazine's many other points of view. In addition to its 19 pages on the flood, for example, the Feb. 8 issue presented picture stories of three film sets (two Hollywood, one Italian), a hippopotamus named Lotus, "The Case of the Bungling Burglar," notes from the private life of Douglas Fairbanks and other entertainers, four pages devoted to a corset-buyers convention, and one to a world-record producing milk cow. The issue also included nearly 18 pages of advertisements, most of which used photography, and two of which used the arresting new technology of full-color photographic reproduction. Combined, these feature and commercial texts made up more than half of the magazine's pictorial and rhetorical terrain.

Life's proposition that it "effectively visualized" and "properly reported" world events must be considered in light of this multiplicity of perspectives. Moreover, because this heterogeneous framework has proven to be a lasting and influential vehicle of photojournalism, the early picture magazine can help illuminate the structuring of our own mass-mediated non-fictions. While documentaries like The River are a minor genre today, the form pioneered by Life—fragments of photo-realism interspersed with fragments of photo-fantasy—continue to be our primary vehicle for "the news."

In 1936, few people realized the enormous appeal of this new form. As mentioned in chapter 1, prospective advertisers voiced concern about the close proximity of editorial and advertising photography in Life's novel format, and this same Feb. 8 issue created the hippopotamus/Campbell's soup conjunction that resulted in the advertiser's cancellation (Elson 306). Using this anecdote as a clue, we may return to Life's coverage of the flood,

investigating, now, what messages the magazine's combinations of pictorial journalism and pictorial advertising might have added to its story of encompassing and heroic perspective.

Life's Feb. 8 story, titled "America's Worst Flood Makes Nearly a Million Refugees," opened with a photograph quite typical of the period's documentary style: a medium-range shot taken at a downward angle, portraying three young flood refugees as they lay sleeping on the floor of a railroad terminal. The image invited empathy, but its caption explained that these children represented a problem: "After the flood came disease, fire, looting, and martial law. But the refugees were the overwhelming problem" (9). The caption connected the flood to social disorder and pathology, and this was linked to the dislocation of its human victims. Opposite this problem statement on page nine, however, a solution appeared that seems surprisingly appropriate. Across the porous boundary that separated news from advertisement, Bell Telephone presented a photo-realistic image of an adult couple shopping in a rainstorm. Readers were encouraged to imagine how a home telephone could resolve such predicaments: "A single telephone call may save a life. . . . One telephone call may be worth more than the cost of the service for months and years to come" (8). Purchasing a telephone would connect "you," the advertisement emphasized, with the entire Bell system apparatus:

Every time you call a number, you use some part of a nation-wide telephone system that cost more than four billion dollars to build and employs about 300,000 people. The facilities of this entire organization are yours to command—anywhere, any time, and at a small cost. (8)

The couple in the rainstorm met, through juxtaposition, the children in the flood. Together they formed a family whose problem was watery and whose solution was

mechanical. Combining this serendipitous juxtaposition of sales pitch and documentary photograph, we find an argument made quite often in the aftermath of the flood: that the machinery of mass communication played a vital role in alleviating suffering during and after the disaster. The American Red Cross, for example, cited the "conspicuously fine service" performed by telephone and telegraph companies, even to the extent of laying wire over flood waters (90). This mass-media mediation is analogous to the grander claim made by Life, that "when a few more floods are properly reported by pictures, America will decide that there shall be no more floods."

It is unlikely that the messages resulting from Life's juxtaposition of flood disaster and telephonic salvation were intended by any particular editor or layout artist. Nor did this blending of advertisement and photojournalism make sense in a rationally logical way. A telephone would not save the flood children, any more than a pictured hippopotamus would affect the quality of a soup. Through the visual logic of the magazine montage, however—a logic of metaphor and analogy—such meanings did coalesce in an ordered and persuasive form. Such messages were inherent in Life's format, and they resulted, each week, from the conjoined efforts of hundreds of people. These conjunctions of editorial and advertising photo-narratives created structures of meaning far beyond the scope of any particular two-page spread, single event, or specific individual. Nevertheless, these juxtapositions exerted an enormous pressure on the form of contemporary realism, and many of the decade's photographers responded directly to this influence.

In February 1937, for example, while on assignment for the two-month-old Life, the photographer Margaret Bourke-White found herself standing in front of a billboard in

Louisville, Kentucky. Her mission was follow-up coverage of the flood, and she had hitchhiked into Louisville by rowboat and raft (Bourke-White 149). Her photographs appeared in Life's Feb. 15 issue, in a five-page story that featured both levee-building on the Tennessee River—a major tributary in the threatened agricultural lands of the Mississippi Valley—and the disaster in Louisville, one of the Ohio Valley's largest cities ("Flood" 9-13).

The photographer found the city three-quarters underwater. By choice and necessity she focused her camera on the newspaper offices of the Courier-Journal and Times, two of the few concerns still active in the flood's aftermath. But amid the general devastation Bourke-White discovered another, more anomalous, subject for her photo-essay: a twenty-foot advertisement financed by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM). Part of the 1936 presidential campaign, the billboard pictured an Anglo family of four, smiling aggressively, on a driving tour through a rolling countryside. A family dog appeared in a back seat window, but the tableau's crucial sixth character dominated the scene: the family's shining black sedan, drawn so that it seemed about to leap from the boundaries of the billboard. Two textual messages were superimposed over this set-piece: "WORLD'S HIGHEST STANDARD OF LIVING," and "There's no way like the American Way."

NAM's billboards were part of an extensive anti-Roosevelt campaign, and they also appear—often in juxtapositions of considerable irony—in FSA photographs by Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Edwin Locke, John Vachon, and Arthur Rothstein (Guimond 112-13). In 1985 Rothstein told an historian that NAM's billboard clichés seemed so absurd in light of contemporary events that the FSA photographers identified

them as opportunities for visual irony (Guimond 112). In fact, the style of NAM's "American Way" campaign closely resembled the period's product advertising, and one of the best descriptions of their style comes from Bourke-White's depiction of her own commercial photography.

Composing an epitaph to her work in New York's advertising circles, Bourke-White described the photographs she created for Buick Motors:

Truly these were enchanted motorcars. No sorrow ever befell their occupants. The joy on the faces of the drivers and the driven was indelible. As with the world of Buddha while he was still an early prince guarded from any knowledge of unhappiness or want, life with the right motorcar held no poverty, no old age, no grief. The lucky passengers who motored through the advertising pages were perpetually headed toward paradise, where all they had to do was smile, smile, smile. (83-84)

Bourke-White had retired her advertising accounts a few months before she arrived in Louisville, in part (she wrote years later) because of a nightmare featuring enormous Buick sedans that threatened to eat her alive (112). She turned instead to the documentary collaboration with Erskine Caldwell and to full-time photojournalism for Life. Assigned to cover the effects of the flood in Louisville, Bourke-White discovered the NAM billboard, which would likely bring to mind her recent work for Buick Motors, within a context that mirrored the disquieting patterns that she had recently found in the homes of Southern sharecroppers. On that particular day, a group of African-American refugees stood just below the enchanted family of the NAM advertisement, waiting, with varying degrees of patience, for food-relief distributed by the Red Cross. The result of this triple encounter was one of the most extraordinary photographs of the American thirties, now known as "At the Time of the Louisville Flood."

Joining fantasy and realism, contentment and disaster, White and Black, Bourke-White's photograph was built on antitheses. Because of its divided structure—and because of the wide gap separating the iconography of billboard and breadline—the photograph can be read as an ironic commentary on the advertisement within it. This is, I believe, a common interpretation, and it might be stated as follows: the photograph's realism shattered the fantasies of corporate optimism. The hard realities of poverty and desperation critiqued NAM's willful blindness, exposing the self-serving, vacuous nature of the billboard's bright fiction. *Life's* re-presentation of the billboard becomes an example of "exposé quotation," a characteristic technique of thirties social documentary (Stott 173-75). The Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels read the photograph this way in 1937, for example, publishing it with the caption "Thank God, we have a better way" (qtd. in Theodore Brown 62).

This widespread reading the photograph's juxtapositions—as a kind of "demystificatory realism"—does in fact register some of the tensions drawn out between its contradictory halves. But this is not the limit of the photograph's complexities, and it ignores many of its polarized oppositions. Rita Barnard and Theodore Brown both have noted one point that complicates this reading. Because the pictured breadline was produced by a natural disaster rather than by the economic collapse, the straightforward antithesis of consumerist fantasy and economic deprivation falters (Barnard 247 n. 8; Brown 62). Instead, Bourke-White's image emblemized what I have called the "New Deal reading" of the flood, a more complex argument that used the natural disaster as a symbol of the Great Depression itself. This analogy, made most persuasively by *The River*, argued that both the flood and the economic breakdown were caused by



shortsighted mis-management of the nation's natural and social resources. Uncoordinated, laissez faire exploitation of lumber in the north and cotton lands in the South had fed a chain of events that caused both the periodic cataclysms and the slower, equally devastating erosion of the nation's farmland. This was Life's interpretation of Bourke-White's photograph, as demonstrated by its caption: "[S]oon most of the cost of relief and rehabilitation would shift back to the Government. It was going to take a lot of money to restore the American standard of living in the cities and towns of the Ohio valley" (9). Evoking the powers of the federal government in this context—and against the billboard's faith in private enterprise—located the magazine on the Democratic side of the recent, bitterly contested election. Even within this more nuanced reading of the flood and the photograph, however, other complications immediately arise. To note only the most obvious: the African-Americans pictured could never be "restored" to the mythic America presented in the billboard, if only because of their race. Like the billboard it seemed to critique, the caption glided over the fact that there were multiple "American Ways" in the Ohio Valley and that some were more equal than others.<sup>3</sup>

A deeper complication stems from the photograph's context. As a step toward illuminating some of the tensions that interpose themselves here, we might acknowledge

---

<sup>3</sup> Racist allocations of relief supplies during the 1927 Mississippi Valley flood had been a national disgrace. Some evidence suggests that the record was better in 1937, but in Louisville refugee tent cities were still segregated, and the best sites and supplies were reserved for Whites. City authorities used the flood clean-up to engage in slum clearance, permanently destroying some Black neighborhoods. See, for example, these articles from the Louisville Courier-Journal: "East End Negro District Under Quarantine," 2 Feb. 1937 (1); "Second Area is Freed from Quarantine," 4 Feb. 1937 (1); "West End Restrictions Ordered Lifted Today," 5 Feb. 1937 (1); "Home Colony for Refugees Waits O.K." 10

that "At the Time of the Louisville Flood" is as much a product of commodity culture as the advertisement contained within it. It, too, was created to be seen by millions, and it, too, was reproduced and distributed on a nationwide scale. It owes its existence and its effect to Life magazine, a medium that was as much a mass-market phenomenon as the National Association of Manufacturers. Life's product, of course, was the world's most perishable commodity: the "news." More concretely, Life sold a weekly, printed amalgam of paid advertisements (which often resembled NAM's billboard) and photo-mechanical images like "At the Time of the Louisville Flood." Along with five of Bourke-White's flood photographs, for example, Life's Feb. 15, 1937, issue contained 41 advertisements, 12 using black-and-white and color photography, and five selling new cars. The distribution networks, iconography, and rhetoric that shaped and supported "At the Time of the Louisville Flood," in other words, mirrored those of the advertisement it incorporated within its borders.

I want to be clear here about what I am not arguing. I am not arguing that the photograph's critical power is inevitably undermined by its status as a mass-market commodity. I believe that Bourke-White's juxtaposition of misery and fantasy could and did raise troubling questions about commodity culture for readers in 1937. But the amphibian nature of the photograph—both journalistic "truth" and mass-market commodity—suggests that the image should be read with more attention to what, the previous year, Max Ernst had called "the culture of systematic displacement and its effects" (13).

In its juxtaposition of widely disparate figurative elements, "At the Time of the Louisville Flood" is Surreal in a precise sense. The photograph's straightforward point of view and exclusion of extraneous detail flattened its perspective and conjoined the two contrasting elements. These choices of subject matter, angle, and framing demonstrated Bourke-White's eye for the "chance" encounters and illusory perspectives celebrated by the artists and authors of the Parisian Centrale Surréaliste. Like "At the Time of the Louisville Flood," Ernst's collage constructions often incorporated commodity images which retained their representational value but which shifted meanings dramatically through the artist's re-contextualizations. And like Ernst's 1936 origin myth—which located collage's origin in the commercial products of a culture increasingly dependent on the commodity image—Bourke-White's published memoirs focused on the surreality of her lived encounters with advertising's dream-world. Drawing out these linkages between Bourke-White's photographic practice and Surrealist techniques requires a return to Bourke-White's wry characterization of her Buick Motors photography—with more attention to her metaphors.

In the autobiographical quotation cited on page 118, Bourke-White portrayed advertising photography as structured by tensions drawn between progress and arrest. Joy was "indelible" in the enchanted moments she captured on film, Bourke-White wrote, and her Buick's inhabitants were frozen "perpetually headed toward paradise." Her characterization emphasized the strangely mortified quality of this "life" caught on film, untouched by all human pain. Bourke-White wrote that even as her Manhattan studio thrived, she became more and more disenchanted with the artifice of advertising: "I

longed to see the real world. . . I felt I could never again face a shiny automobile stuffed with vapid smiles" (Portrait 112).

"Then," she wrote, "I had a dream":

I still remember the mood of terror. Great unfriendly shapes were rushing toward me, threatening to crush me down. As they drew closer, I recognized them as the Buick cars I had been photographing. . . . Run as fast as I could, I could not escape them. . . . As they moved faster I began to stumble, and as they towered over me, pushing me down, I woke up to find that I had fallen out of bed and was writhing on the floor with my back strained. I decided that if a mere dream could do this to me, the time had come to get out of this type of photography altogether. (Portrait 112)

Dream-work and its uncanny displacements are, of course, a privileged terrain for Surrealist inspiration. As a result, we may use this dream recounted by Bourke-White to draw out "At the Time of the Louisville Flood's" close proximity to Surrealism. Moreover, when brought together with Bourke-White's recounted nightmare, the photograph can help illuminate the roots of our own mass-mediated reality. The human figures Bourke-White captured in her advertising photography appeared to her strangely inanimate—frozen in place as they motored toward paradise. Her dream cast this spell in reverse: the automobiles, endowed by advertising with the powers to enliven and animate their human occupants, suddenly themselves turned monstrous, auto-mobile, and terrifying. Bourke-White's dream, in other words, provided her with a personal and particular vision of the Marxian commodity-fetish at work; the dead object became magically alive, "dancing of its own free will" with mobility and volition (Marx 164).

Bourke-White constructed her renunciation of advertising at the moment when this "mere dream" caused her real, physical injury. In the homes of impoverished Southerners, she soon discovered a waking version of that dream, and it rebounded on the

authority of documentary realism as well as advertising. Her conjunction of these opposed figurative styles, therefore, should be read as an emblematic critique of the commodification of both dream and reality. As Rita Barnard has suggested, "At the Time of the Louisville Flood" may be read as a dialectical image in Walter Benjamin's sense—a juxtaposition that short circuits the polar, ideological oppositions of reality and dream, history and myth, object and subject (137). More broadly, the widespread documentary practice of incorporating advertising figuration may be interpreted as an attempt to expose the workings of the commodity form, which covertly elided the difference between dream and reality while claiming to maintain the distinction. During the same years that the Surrealists declared war on realism, attempting to liberate humanity from an artificial boundaries separating dream and reality, the picture magazine worked quietly toward this same erasure, bringing together both dream and reality under the spell of the commodity form.

In the same span of years that Life and its peers developed the tools to exploit the power of photojournalism, advertising began its wholesale shift from graphic to photographic illustration. These discourses of photojournalism and photo-advertisement were officially segregated, but they appeared to readers in the same visual and temporal field. Life's editors attempted in various ways to distinguish editorial material from advertising, but these markers were loose and inconsistently applied. In addition, Life's frequent photo-features—often coverage of media events, publicity stunts, and promotions—further blurred the line between artifice and reality. Advertisers did what they could to confuse the issue by echoing and parodying the emerging design elements Life used to distinguish "news," "feature," and "commercial" photography.

The result was an broadly pervasive conjoining of photographic worlds, and we may follow the traces of its development in Life's first full year, 1937. In a way never before attempted, Life promised its readers a photographic record of history as it happened. At the same moment, advertising developed photography, as John Berger has noted, to hide the fact that in its world there is no history: "[Advertising], situated in a future continually deferred, excludes the present and so eliminates all becoming, all development. Experience is impossible within it. All that happens, happens outside it" (152). Photography's crucial support for such a strategy lies in its unmatched ability to present the tangible world. Advertising's eventless unreality would hamstring its purpose, Berger argued, without the power of the photograph to make tangibility an event in itself.

Tangibility of historical events was precisely what Life promised its consumers. Perception of the photo-mechanical image, Life argued, was a moment of apprehension:

This year [1937] has been reported in pictures as no year has ever been. Already countless people feel they can't know all about a news story until they see its pictures.

This is a year they have seen. . . seen the Coronation, seen the Flood, seen the Sit-Down Strike and the Hindenburg Crash and the Windsor Wedding. And it wasn't until they saw the pictures rushed from bombed Shanghai that people everywhere knew and understood what non-combatant warfare really means. (Time Inc., "New Informing Force" 56)

The crucial conflations here occurred in the verbs. "To see"—to visually perceive—was equated in the common metaphorical sense with two other actions: "to know" and "to understand." Casting itself as a modern necessity, however, Life claimed more than metaphor. Visual perception of a photographic representation became a prerequisite for knowledge and understanding of that representation's object. In short, the picture magazine effaced the difference between real, historical objects and their photographic

representations.

The covert link, then, between photo-advertising and photojournalism lay in the perceiving subject's relationship to the objects represented. The world of advertising was quite literally a world of magic. In this realm, the fetish-object—the new soap, the new soup, the new car—transformed its consumer, magically unifying and completing her or him. In doing so, the commodity-fetish gathered into itself the power to reconcile the subject with its object world. In the journalistic commodity—the picture magazine sold for a dime on any newsstand—readers found this promise writ large. The photo-realistic image would reconcile its perceiving subject with modernity as a whole. Consumption of the photograph promised to be a moment of knowledge and understanding, a moment when "people everywhere" could discover what the events represented "really mean." The flood narrative is useful because here Life made its promised subject/object reconciliation explicit. Once people truly saw, the picture magazine argued, the dislocations and disaster of the flood would disappear: "America will decide that there shall be no more floods."

Instead, the picture magazine's actual effect was to blur the difference between commercial and journalistic photography and, as a result, between the worlds portrayed by each. This first blurring was recognized and exploited by advertisers. Historian Roland Marchand notes that in the thirties advertising directors adopted the camera as a selling tool because of its "sincerity," a word that denoted effect rather than intention. Although carefully staged and manipulated, "the photograph was 'sincere' because people accepted it as showing the literal truth" (150). The second collapse of difference—between the object-worlds of advertising and photojournalism—provided a crucial component of Life's appeal.

The magazine's self-promotion, cited above, implied that its string of events added up to a year, 1937. Rather than by addition, however, Life's version of reality could better be equated with the workings of fashion as theorized by Benjamin.<sup>4</sup> Just as fashion depended on an perpetual cycle of novelty and obsolescence, so too did the picture magazine's presentation of the "news." Both within and among its weekly issues, Life offered readers a ever-changing vision of the world that nonetheless reduced discrete events to the comforting repetition of weekly picture stories, equating coronation with flood with strike with disaster with wedding with warfare. The picture magazine promised "life" in all its variety and instead delivered a serial string of equivalents, packaged sets of photographs that replaced one another in a paradoxically static progress. Like the passengers of Bourke-White's pictured automobiles, in other words, Life's readers encountered visions of history frozen on the road toward paradise, pointed toward a bright future, yet simultaneously locked within an endlessly repeating present.

However, I do not wish to imply here that the picture magazine erased the differences between journalism and advertising. Readers could and did distinguish between the fictitious couple in the Bell Telephone advertisement and the children in the flood photograph. The picture magazine's patchwork of juxtapositions was heterogeneous and contradictory, and readers experienced it as such. The crucial point is that the combination of these streams of photographic imagery created cross-currents of meaning that connected the officially separate worlds of photo-realism and advertising, proposing

---

<sup>4</sup> On Benjamin's conception of fashion, see Benjamin (Illuminations 151-53), Adorno ("Letters" 110-20), and Buck-Morss (Dialectics 96-101).



commodity fetishism as the complement to real-world dislocation and pain. Further examples will help uncover how the magazine as a whole worked to create such meanings, and one lies fortuitously close at hand. Opposite "At the Time of the Louisville Flood," Life offered its readers an advertisement that mimicked the picture magazine's structure in miniature, juxtaposing photo-realism and commodified fulfillment within its single frame.

Readers opening Life's Feb. 15 issue to its follow-up story on the flood simultaneously opened to a full-page advertisement for Heinz tomato products (Heinz 8). Reading across the gutter of white space that separated these pages, we discover notable similarities. At least in part, these parallels were the result of conscious intent. Heinz clearly sought to blur the line between advertising "fiction" and the picture magazine's "fact." The advertisement consisted of nine images arranged in three rows, with a caption underneath each picture. Its first two rows presented six photographs of farm workers and fields outside of Bowling Green, Ohio. Their style can be best described as "straight" or documentary: sharply focused, well-lit, using a conventional lens and point of view. Five of the six showed uniformly dressed farm workers at medium range, connecting the images through a visual rhythm. Their captions linked them further, into a narrative sequence demonstrating the planting, growing, harvesting, and processing of the Heinz "Aristocrat Tomato." The ad's final row, however, broke with this photographic and narrative framework, mirroring the promised metamorphosis at the moment of commodity acquisition. The narrative continued in a loose sense, since the tomato continued its trek from the fields of its production to the fields of consumer consumption. But Heinz presented this movement as, quite literally, transformative.

The final row's first picture (continuing to read top-to-bottom and left-to-right) presented the Aristocrat tomato itself, transfigured into a stereotype of human aristocracy, with dinner jacket, top hat, and monocle. The next photograph offered readers a potential image of themselves to pair with the urbane tomato: an elegantly made-up female model drinking tomato juice. Readers could here discover the magical power of commodity culture, able to bridge the gap between commercial object and human subject. The far right photograph (likely to be the last seen by a reader) returned readers to a more realistic encounter with the tomato in its commodified form, showing seven bottles and cans of Heinz products.

The advertisement worked on a number of levels to collapse the distance between its portraits of agricultural production and cosmopolitan consumption. The narrative movement that followed the tomato from seedling to store shelf worked to connect the three rows, as did the carefully rendered photo-realism of the cartoon tomato (evident in the drawing's conventional portrait view, its highlights and shadows, and its curtain backdrop). This is particularly clear when juxtaposed with the photograph of the female model of similar size, point of view, and angle of lighting. Of course, at this level the advertisement's connections were explicitly fictitious. Readers could readily ascribe to the six farm photographs a realism unlike that of the drawn and posed images in the ad's final row. But Heinz connected commodity vision and photo-realism at a higher level as well, and in doing so it borrowed its signifiers from Life.

The advertisement's layout of photograph and caption mimicked Life's frequent single-page narrative "acts," as well as its continuing weekly sections, "The Camera Overseas" and "Life on the American Newsfront." Heinz's captions were written in the

idiosyncratic "Timestyle" syntax used by Life in its first years, and this verbal echo also troubled the boundaries between the advertisement and Life's editorial sections (Elson 304). This mimicry of Life's format and style is a familiar advertising technique, as common today as it was earlier this century. Agencies designed advertisements that resembled a popular magazine's editorial sections, presumably in the hope that readers would not notice, or would not immediately notice, that the ad was a vehicle of sales rather than information or entertainment. Such readers would accept lines like "No anonymity is the Heinz tomato" as the statement of Time Inc. rather than Heinz Inc (8). Formal parallels like this one created meanings through what the semiotician Roland Barthes has called a "global signified," a message conveyed through the ad's structural echo of other pictorial systems (34-35). We may call the global signified of Heinz chosen structure (with apologies) "Life-liness." Like the flood coverage which began on page nine, Heinz's advertisement used photographs and captions to relay a narrative of a particular time and place. And like the magazine as a whole, Heinz juxtaposed this realism with images drawn from the fantastic realm of commodity culture. To borrow the terms of another thirties narrative, readers discovered Kansas and Oz drawn together on a single plane.

The center of Heinz's fictive world was a woman, like The Wizard of Oz's Dorothy, whose dreams took her far from her dull everyday existence—the consumer herself, assumed to be female, domestic, and given to romanticized and exotic fantasies. As discussed in chapter 2, this image of the American consumer formed a standard component of the era's advertising discourse. A 1934 contributor to the trade journal Printer's Ink explained the reasoning behind such imagery, reminding his colleagues,

"We must remember that most American women lead rather monotonous and humdrum lives....Such women need romance. They crave glamour and color" (qtd. in Marchand 67). Advertisements, therefore, should encourage these women to "daily see themselves as femme fatales, as Cleopatra or Helen of Troy" (67). The magic spell cast by Heinz's 1937 advertisement transformed its reader into a woman whose attire and poise marked her as sophisticated and cosmopolitan. In the enchanted world of commodity fetishism, she became the fitting consort of the animated object, the elegant, "aristocratic" tomato. The effect, as I have argued above, is to blur the line between realism and commodity fantasy, encouraging readers to experience themselves and their world as acts of consumption.

This is, of course, a sweeping indictment to lay at the feet of Heinz's cartoon tomato. Life offered readers dozens of similar pairings, however, including more "realistic" blendings of (female) subjects and the world of commodity fetishism. The same issue that carried the Heinz advertisement, for example, presented a three-page photo-feature illustrating how a wife should undress for her husband (41-43). Here Life carried reification to an extreme, encouraging readers to frame women as objects displayed solely for the gaze of the husband/camera. Life's more typical images of women were more contradictory, however, and once again the magazine's star photographer, Margaret Bourke-White, offers a useful example of the instabilities that marked many of Life's female subject/object constructions. In addition to serving as Time Inc.'s most visible representative, Bourke-White took advantage of her fame in the late thirties by endorsing cigarettes, air travel, telephones, and California wines. This final endorsement appeared, along with an image of the smiling Bourke-White in an evening

gown, in Life itself (Goldberg 194-95). Manifesting the trend that historian Roland Marchand has called advertising's "re-personalization" of American life, such blendings of journalistic stardom and commodity fulfillment linked the worlds pictured by photojournalism and advertising (352). Like the mythic consumer within the Heinz's tomato narrative, these images of Bourke-White offered readers idealized conjunctions of modern woman-and-commodity. The products aligned with her image—including Life itself—became associated with real-life adventure and fame; together they promised to transform their consumers and to transform their lives. A similar advertisement from Life's Feb. 15, 1937, issue indicates the broad appeal of such figures. It featured a celebrity endorsement by Dorothy Kilgallen, a "spunky, globe-circling girl reporter," presented, like Bourke-White, as both a real, historical journalist and as the glamorous object of concentrated media scrutiny (Camel 39). Iconic representations of modernity, mass culture, and consumption, these constructions of modern femininity slid unstably from viewing subject to viewed object. Life's women functioned, in other words, in a similar manner to those appearing in its sister publication Fortune. To further illuminate the effects of such images in the picture magazine, I will turn now to a contemporary example from Fortune, which drew explicitly on Surrealism in order to conjoin images of modern society and femininity.

As I argued in chapter 1, the Fortune illustration called "An American Dream of Venus" can stand as an emblem of the tumultuous changes that rocked American culture in the 1930s ("Plastics" 88-89). The image pictured the business sphere of the future as a world of dangerous and destabilizing flux, and it did so by combining images of high art, femininity, and consumer culture. A photo-montage created by the commercial studio

Matter-Bourges, the "American Dream of Venus" opened an article titled "Plastics in 1940." The article presented these new synthetic materials as the wave of the future, and its illustration envisioned that future as a colorful chaos. The photo-montage spilled across two of the magazine's oversized pages, presenting dozens of brightly colored consumer items scattered in a carefully disordered manner. These were dominated by a clear plastic dressmaker's form filled with water and goldfish.

Like many of Fortune's illustrations, this emblem evoked the traditions of art history. Its caption indicted that this modern Venus rose "from the plastic sea," linking the tableau to Sandro Botticelli's Renaissance masterpiece, The Birth of Venus (89). A blue curtain backdrop recalled the iconography of easel painting, and as a framing device it helped stabilize the image's sprawl. Despite these allusions, however, the illustration's differences from the painterly tradition were more noteworthy. While Botticelli's Venus was more than human, Matter-Bourges's was something less. In contrast with the monumental size, symmetrical framing, and classical style of The Birth of Venus—which presented an ethereal Goddess poised on a clam shell—Matter-Bourges presented Venus become a shell: a hard plastic container filled with goldfish. Even the curtain backdrop slid into disorder and abstraction, fading to black and finally transforming at its right edge into a trapezoid bordered by a snarl of unwound film. The pictured objects escaped even this border, accumulating on the bottom of the right-hand page and impinging on the article's text.

The illustration further undercut its allusion to Botticelli by presenting the modern Venus as exceeding the (fragmented) female form. The "American Dream of Venus" included the scattered objects that surround the torso, submerging the artificial woman

among its kin: "Dentures, doorknobs, gears, goggles, juke-boxes, crystal chairs, transparent shoes and ladies rise up from the plastic sea" (89). Given the layout, it is not surprising that the caption quickly dropped its reference to Renaissance classicism in favor of a more modern style: "Only surrealism's derangements can capture the limitless horizons, strange juxtapositions, endless products of this new world in process of becoming" (89). In other words, Fortune drew on Surrealism's "derangements" of a particular fine art tradition—the classical female nude—to embody the strangely fluid instabilities demonstrated by these modern materials—and, by synecdoche, by modernity as a whole.

In fact, Fortune's evocation of fine art and Botticelli came second-hand, mediated through a consummately mass-cultural vision of the future. The illustration's overt reference was to "Dali's Dream of Venus," a mammoth installation that the Surrealist painter Salvador Dali created for the 1940 World's Fair in New York. Like the Fortune illustration, Dali structured his pavilion around inversions of the European pictorial tradition—connecting myth, nature, and the nude through a series of tropic reversals. Among the painter's inspirations for the pavilion were what the New Yorker called an "underwater parlor," a water-filled tank occupied by young women "wearing surrealist fins and tails and little else" (Harriman 22):

The room contains a piano with a keyboard shaped like a woman's body, telephones, typewriters, a fireplace, and a gauze cow. Everything is made of rubber, and it all undulates wildly as the girls—or "liquid ladies," as Dali prefers to call them—swim around underwater, playing the piano, telephoning, typewriting, lighting the fire, and occasionally, in an absent-minded way, milking the cow. (Harriman 22)

By the time Fortune published its version, the World's Fair "Dream" had flopped. Dali disavowed the project in November 1939, in part because the pavilion's financial backers refused to allow him to add the head of a fish to an enormous reproduction of Botticelli's Venus on the facade (Levy 219). Venus did appear (without the fish head), but, under control of its financiers, the pavilion re-opened as "20,000 Legs Under the Sea." As Dickran Tashjian notes, such a possibility seemed inherent from the project's beginnings (64).

In other words—and precisely like Fortune—"Dali's Dream of Venus" proffered images of "Woman" constructed as the objects of men's gazes. Recent feminist scholarship locates similar tendencies within a wide-ranging body of Surrealist practice. As Susan Rubin Suleiman has observed, both the original Surrealists and later historians too often worked from exclusively male subject positions, which they then ascribed to the position of the Surrealist subject in general. Women, or rather, "Woman" thus became the object of both artistic and critical practice (21). The result was a telling erasure of women as the creators, rather than spectators or objects, of Surrealist practice. Clearing a space to consider the work of a later generation of women artists, the editors of Surrealism and Women have stressed the ideological effects of this equation of Surrealist and male subjectivity: "'Woman' functioned within male surrealist works at best as an idealized Other, at worst as an object for the projection of unresolved anxieties, and continued to be identified in traditional terms of body, irrationality, and nature" (Caws et al. 8). The few early women Surrealists, like Meret Oppenheim, worked in the tense space between incompatible oppositions, often more valued as the Muses, models, and lovers of male Surrealists than as creative participants in their own right (Caws et al. 37).



Dali's and Fortune's twin dreams of Venus demonstrate, then, one of the key parallels linking the avant gardists of the Centrale Surréaliste to the American mass media. In short, Surrealists like Dali and publishers like Time Inc. found common ground in the objectification of women's bodies. As a result, Surrealism's tendency to construct "Woman" as a reified receptacle of unresolved anxieties can illuminate some of the darker resonances that overlaid Fortune's allusion to Dali's "liquid ladies." As noted earlier, the illustration's caption invited readers to think of plastics both as Venus and as a "strange new world in process of becoming." It continued: "Tough cellulose plastic doorknobs, for instance, are readily translatable into gunstocks. Nylon hosiery—a plastic, too—can turn into parachutes. The transparent lady also serves as the nonshatterable windshield on bombing planes" (89). Fourteen months after this caption's appearance, the United States would officially enter World War II. At the moment of its publication, the nation was actively aiding the Allies and preparing for military engagement. In this context, Fortune connected doorknobs, hosiery, and a "transparent lady" to the military apparatus of guns, parachutes, and bombers. It claimed that only Surrealism could render a vision of materials that transmuted along an unstable boundary between (male) sexual desire and warfare. The American dream of beauty slid into nightmare, and the last sentence on the page made this conjunction explicit. While U.S. business had perfected the use of plastics for "color and novelty," the Nazis had exploited its potentials in industry: "The bleak German genius has always seemed to lead here, turning plastics to use in pipe lines, agricultural machinery, and aircraft parts to serve its metal-hungry economy of death" (89). The schizophrenic face of modernity becomes visible, as the

bright baubles of consumer culture—identified with flux, fluidity, and sexuality—morph into the concrete building-blocks of an industrial "economy of death."

Such grim combinations of libidinal desire and mechanized warfare might seem a great distance from Life's brighter images of heroic federal agencies, aristocratic tomatoes, globe-circling photographers, and glamorous consumers. In fact, however, Life consistently made conjunctions similar to those found in Fortune's "Dream of Venus," with one key difference. Rather than collapsing images of desire and trauma in a single, unified symbol, Life instead paired them within an allegorical framework that juxtaposed images while maintaining their overt distinction. These instances of montage logic, as I have argued earlier, formed a crucial component of Life's rhetorical effect.

The same years that Life took its place at the center of American culture proved to be among the bloodiest periods in world history, and the timing was not altogether coincidental. A year before Life appeared, one Time editor argued that "a war, any sort of war, is going to be a natural promotion" for a picture magazine (Elson 271-72). In the thirties Life provided ample coverage of the Sino-Japanese, Spanish, and Ethiopian wars, and the entry of the United States into World War II made combat photography the magazine's central mission. Despite its new vocation after 1941, however, "work on one of the magazine's most enduring interests, the photography of sexy women, went on apace" (Wainwright 131).

A twin fascination with sex and death was, in fact, the most common attribute noted by contemporary observers of the new picture magazines. The author of "Picture Magazines and Morons," for example, once again located the formula's roots in the tabloid newspapers: "Hordes of people who never ruffle the pages of a book devour with

fierce interest the pictures of sex and death which the tabloids print as news" (J.L. Brown 405). Scribner's described the new weeklies' most successful formula as "half-death, half-sex," and the same article quoted the New Republic's earlier description of Look as a combination morgue and freak show: "We can think of no reason why Look should not go to a circulation of ten millions—if the supply of corpses hold out and people don't get tired of looking at them" (102). Particularly in its early years, Life struggled to maintain a balance that would both increase circulation and hold off the loudest attacks of ghoulishness and prurience. Simultaneously, the magazine developed an unparalleled influence within American culture, offering its readers compelling new visions of themselves and their world. In short, the development of photographic culture in the thirties brought photo-realism and commodity fetishism into new alignments, creating a medium whose images of modernity were both fantastically Surreal and rhetorically compelling. The adjoining images of flood disaster and "How a Wife Should Undress" in Life's Feb. 15, 1937, issue, for example, should be read as a complex reaction to an age marked by grandiose hopes, economic meltdown, and looming global war. One indication of this form's impact on Americans' understandings of their era may be found in a 1939 novel by William Faulkner, which attempted to critique this developing "culture of systematic displacement" by turning its formal structures against it.

### **A Portrait of the Artist as Surrealist Woman**

More than any other work in William Faulkner's oeuvre, If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem takes place on a national stage. This broad scope reflects the influence of the author's extended stays—during early stages of the novel's conception—in the cultural

centers of Hollywood and New York City. Furthermore, Jerusalem presents one of Faulkner's most anomalous characters; in Charlotte Rittenmeyer, Faulkner created not only his sole mature portrait of the artist in America but also his only vision of the artist as Surrealist. Although critics have neglected this aspect of Charlotte's artistic practice, the character's alignment with Surrealism in fact illuminates crucial aspects of Jerusalem's formal structure. As Faulkner attempted nothing less than a snapshot picture of modernity, both Charlotte Rittenmeyer's Surrealism and Jerusalem's problematic form emerged as his most important instruments. When Faulkner turned to the intersections of modernity, mass culture, and art in the late 1930s, in other words, he discovered Surrealism already there. The foundational irrationalities of modern life demanded an representation that was itself riven by contradiction. In this book of monstrous inversions, nightmarish imagery, and uncanny juxtapositions, Faulkner himself experimented with Surrealist techniques.

The formal problem posed by Faulkner's eleventh novel is deceptively simple. Called If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem by its author—and long known as The Wild Palms by its readers—the book is not in fact a novel at all. It is instead two novellas, "The Wild Palms" and "Old Man," which share only the most oblique connections. Despite the stories' differences, however, Faulkner composed and published them together, suggesting that readers should experience the narratives as he wrote them: alternating, between chapters, from one to the other.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> As I demonstrate below, "Old Man" and "The Wild Palms" do form a complex unity. For brevity's sake I will continue to call this combination a novel.

"The Wild Palms" tells the story of an illicit love affair between the artist Charlotte Rittenmeyer and Harry Wilbourne, a medical intern. Set in 1937 and 1938 (contemporary with the stories' composition), "The Wild Palms" follows Charlotte and Harry as they flee social condemnation and grinding poverty from New Orleans to Chicago, then a Wisconsin lakefront, a Utah mining camp, San Antonio, Texas, and, finally, back to the Gulf Coast. Doomed from its beginning, trailing "an aura of unsanctity and disaster like a smell," the affair ends badly (51). Charlotte dies from an abortion botched by her medical student lover; convicted of her murder, Harry provides the story's final image as he stares through the bars of his prison cell.

While in "The Wild Palms" Faulkner spun a tale of tragedy and melodrama, in its companion story he offered something closer to farce. Set during the great Mississippi Valley flood of 1927, "Old Man" ends ten years before the action of "The Wild Palms" begins. The story recounts the quixotic adventures of a chain gang convict who becomes both victim and hero of the flood. Deluded or thwarted at every turn, the convict blunders upon a pregnant woman, "rescues" her, and spends the rest of the story struggling to rid himself of her and return to the safety of his prison home. A frame narrative presented "Old Man" as the convict's story, told to other inmates from the womb-like safety of his prison bunk.

The convict travels a circular path, beginning and ending in Mississippi's Parchman prison. Charlotte and Harry also move constantly, and their journey traces a similar pattern (though with a much wider arc). Both female protagonists are or become pregnant, and both male protagonists end their stories facing long sentences in Parchman prison. With that, the stories' explicit parallels end. Their settings and plots share only

tenuous connections, their characters do not overlap, and their tones are jarringly dissonant. Nevertheless, Faulkner wrote the narratives simultaneously, composing "Old Man" as "The Wild Palm's" "antithesis." In a later interview Faulkner described creating the first story in order to punctuate and complete the second: "I realized suddenly that something was missing, it needed emphasis, something to lift it like a counterpoint in music" (Blotner 980). In 1939 he published the stories as he wrote them: alternating their chapters in order to create an antithetical unity.

Jerusalem's readers have struggled ever since to understand why. Cleanth Brooks, for example—among Faulkner's most conscientious interpreters—stated simply, "I cannot claim that I understand The Wild Palms" (265). Faulkner's first editor replaced the author's title with The Wild Palms, distorting the relationship between that story and the work as a whole. Later editors solved the problem by literally taking the stories apart. Each was anthologized separately, and critics often continued this trend by focusing on a single story in isolation from its cognate.<sup>6</sup>

Critics who have considered the stories' interrelationships have followed Faulkner's lead, emphasizing some of the contrasts, doublings, and inversions that suffuse the novel. Despite its pervasive oppositions, however, most critics have concentrated their attention on the stories' nominal protagonists: Harry Wilbourne and the convict. Bruce Kavin, for example, suggests that the characters' parallel development resembles the dialectical montage technique of Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. Both artists

---

<sup>6</sup> Thomas McHaney provides a useful overview of Jerusalem's publishing history in his William Faulkner's The Wild Palms.

developed a style of ongoing contradiction, Kawin argues, in order to evoke that kind of "synthesis-term whose equivalent Eisenstein called 'graphically undepictable'" (112).

Jerusalem's inter-cut chapters, Kawin argues, use the opposed perspectives of Harry and the convict to develop "a complex vision of the demands of freedom and the nature of endurance that neither story, on its own, presents" (118).

The great benefit of Kawin's analysis is to demonstrate the impossibility of separating the novel's form from its content. Although Faulkner probably did not have any rigorous notion of dialectics in mind when he used the term "antithesis," Jerusalem certainly demonstrates a running attempt to maintain a structure of dissonant parallels. Further, because there are parallels, reading the stories inter-cut with one another does affect the reader's experience of each. This is likely what Faulkner meant when he stressed that "dismembering" the book's alternating chapters would "destroy the over-all impact which I intended" (qtd. in McHaney, William Faulkner x).

While Kawin's dialectical approach sets a valuable precedent, however, I will suggest below that an exclusive focus on the Harry/convict nexus misses a key to Jerusalem's structure. Instead, it is the artist Charlotte Rittenmeyer and her doubles that most clearly evidence the stakes involved in the novel's content and form. A close reading of Charlotte's artistic practice shows that it was French Surrealism—as that movement was read through the cultural life of the United States in the late 1930s—that provided the impetus for Faulkner's own narrative experiments.

Charlotte Rittenmeyer is a sculptor and painter, a fact that is emphasized throughout the story's action. She is, moreover, a modernist. Here my reading diverges from that of Janet Carey Eldred, the first to identify the vital role Charlotte's profession

plays in the workings of the novel. Eldred emphasizes the Romantic colors of Charlotte's personal and artistic quests, suggesting that the character's alienation from bourgeois society marks her artistic stance as Byronic. Certainly Charlotte is alienated, but contempt for middle-class culture was among the Romantics' most enduring legacies. Alienation was also a defining trope of modernism, and it was one the few traits shared by most of modernism's many varieties. In addition to the fact that Faulkner placed Charlotte's artistic practice in 1937-38, his depiction of her art and artistic attitudes mark her as modern. Charlotte's first description of her sculpture, for example, demonstrated a formalist's emphasis on the materiality of her medium: "That's what I make: something you can touch, pick up, something with weight in your hand that you can look at the behind side of, that displaces air and displaces water and when you drop it, it's your foot that breaks and not the shape" (35). Later, spying a deer at a lakefront to which she and Harry had retreated, she suggested a Futurist's concern for movement and velocity: "'That's what I was trying to make,' she cried. 'Not the animals, the dogs and deer and horses: the motion, the speed'" (85). In the same setting she revealed an abstractionist's contempt for figurative art: "I dont want [the deer] to pose. That's just what I dont want. I dont want to copy a deer. Anybody can do that" (87).

Finally, though, it is not formalism, abstraction, or Futurism that best defines Charlotte's modernism. In Chicago—her most productive and commercially successful period—she demonstrated a talent for grotesquerie, crafting small figures that were "lean epicene sophisticated and bizarre, with a quality fantastic and perverse" (74). Her (one) non-commercial sculpture was similarly odd, and when she turned to advertising and shop-window displays Charlotte revealed a particular flair for the fantastic.



Commissioned to construct marionettes for an advertising photographer, for example, she created a Falstaff "with the worn face of a syphilitic barber and [so] gross with meat" that the character seemed to wrestle with his own flesh, "not to overcome it but to pass it, escape it, as you do with the atavistic beasts in a nightmare" (77-78). A host of similarly grotesque creations soon populated the couple's apartment, "filling all available spaces on floor and walls, fragile perverse and disturbing" (78). In the context of 1937-38, these combinations of commerce and the fantastic could only mean Surrealism.

In October 1937, shortly after he began the love story that would become "The Wild Palms"—and ten months after the MOMA show had launched Surrealism into Fifth Avenue storefronts and onto the American scene—William Faulkner arrived for an extended stay in New York City. The author spent nearly a month there, returning to Mississippi in early November and to the beginnings of "The Wild Palms" later that month (Blotner 972-76). A week later he made the decisive change that created If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem: beginning the separate flood narrative that would alternate with the lovers' doomed romance. At the same time he began to develop the character of Charlotte Rittenmeyer, creating the scene of her first encounter with Harry Wilbourne (in front of a modernist painting) and the monologue in which she first described her artistic vocation (McHaney, Manuscripts viii).

Although his stay in New York coincided with the Christmas selling season—a period that figured greatly in Charlotte's career as surrealistic shop-window designer—the amount of Surrealism or Surrealist-inspired merchandising Faulkner saw in New York is an open question. What is certain, however, is that shortly after Faulkner returned to Mississippi, the novel's juxtapositions of art, commerce, sexuality, and flood converged.

These combinations decisively determined Jerusalem's thematic and formal terrain; and as both "Dreams of Venus" demonstrate, the same condensations occupied a prominent place in the mass culture of the period. In other words, Dali, Faulkner, and Time Inc. all reacted to their era's constellations of social forces in similar ways. All linked "art, commerce, sexuality, and flood," and all drew on Surrealism's uncanny condensations and displacements in order to figure these connections.

Jerusalem's greatest debt to Surrealism lies in its twinned structure, which juxtaposed "Old Man" and "The Wild Palms" in ways that suggest a shifting series of alignments and oppositions. For example, the parallels created by the novel's inter-cut chapters linked Charlotte Rittenmeyer, the protagonist of "The Wild Palms," to multiple aspects of "Old Man," including a character we may call the "Flood Madonna": the nameless young woman who gives birth soon after she joins the convict in his boat. At the end of chapter 4 of "The Wild Palms," for example, Harry used his "meagre instruments" to (mis)perform Charlotte's abortion, ending her pregnancy and eventually her life (185). At the beginning of chapter 4 of "Old Man"—five pages after the abortion sequence—the Flood Madonna gives birth and the convict uses a tin-can lid to cut the umbilical cord (192). As such great and small echoes proliferate, readers begin to experience the uneasy feeling that they are reading an intricate allegory which is missing its key. Two pages after the clear and proximate contrast between abortion and birth, for example, the convict steals a rabbit from a hawk, described as having an "intolerant omnivorous yellow eye" (194). Harry had earlier described Charlotte as a hawk, and her arresting yellow eyes are her most often cited feature (119). These enigmatic harmonies, major and minor, suffuse the work. Thomas McHaney compares the effect to that of

Eliot's Four Quartets, as constant allusions and repetitions throw retroactive shadows on past images and events (The Wild Palms xx). Rather than any specific pretext, however, the key to Jerusalem is more likely the experience of enigma itself. Like the Surrealist collages of Max Ernst, Jerusalem's structure creates a series of uncanny equations and juxtapositions which defy rational explanation. To help illuminate this structure, I will bracket many other constellations within and among the stories, in favor of one of the more subterranean connections. This is Faulkner's linkage of the artist Charlotte Rittenmeyer to the "Old Man" itself—the flooding Mississippi River.

As noted earlier, Charlotte's yellow gaze was her most distinguishing feature. Throughout the book her stare both paralyzed and engulfed Harry. Soon after the couple arrived in Chicago, for example, Charlotte sold some of her sculpture and returned to their apartment, "her yellow eyes like a cat's in the dark, not triumph or exultation but rather fierce affirmation, and with a new ten dollar bill" (75). When Harry refused to take the money out of a sense of masculine propriety,

She looked at him—an unwinking yellow stare in which he seemed to blunder and fumble like a moth, a rabbit caught in the glare of a torch; an envelopment almost like a liquid, a chemical precipitant, in which all the dross of small lying and sentimentality dissolved away. (75)

We may note in passing that here Harry is cast as rabbit, anticipating the character's own depiction of Charlotte's hawk-like stare. The more significant parallel, however, is between Charlotte's gaze and an "envelopment almost like a liquid." This is a continuation of a trope which began with the lovers' first encounter:

[H]e saw that her eyes were not hazel but yellow, like a cat's, staring at him with a speculative sobriety like a man might, intent beyond mere boldness, speculative beyond any staring. . . .he seemed to be drowning, volition and will, in the yellow stare. (34)

The depiction of Charlotte's eyes as yellow, enveloping, and overpowering continues throughout the book, as does an equation of her force and energy with masculinity. The only other consistently yellow object in the novel is the river itself, particularly at moments of furious, flooding energy.

In "Old Man," Faulkner first reveals the flood through a series of quietly disturbing set pieces that resemble a sequence of surrealistic tableaux. On first appearance the flood took the form of "a single perfectly flat and motionless steel-colored sheet in which the telephone poles and the straight hedgerows which marked section lines seemed to be fixed and rigid as set in concrete" (53). It looked solid, "as if you could walk on it," motionless, and "almost demure" (53). It was none of these things, as the convict discovered when his truck crossed its threshold: "Then the road vanished. There was no perceptible slant to it yet it had slipped abruptly beneath the brown surface with no ripple, no ridgy demarcation, like a flat thin blade slipped obliquely into flesh by a delicate hand, annealed into the water without disturbance, as if it. . .had been built that way" (54). A submerged bridge became a similar moment of uncanny displacement: "two delicate and paradoxical iron railings slanting out of the water, traveling parallel to it for a distance, then slanting down into it again with an outrageous quality almost significant yet apparently meaningless like something in a dream not quite nightmare" (55). The images grew more disturbing as the convict penetrated further into the flooded terrain. He soon saw a burning plantation house, "Juxtaposed to nowhere and neighbored by nothing it stood, a clear steady pyre-like flame rigidly fleeing its own reflection, burning in the dusk about the watery desolation with a quality paradoxical, outrageous, and bizarre" (59).

These early descriptions of the flood reveal a world of flat planes receding quickly into the distance, populated by familiar objects grown subtly disturbing, much like the worlds found in painting by Ernst or Yves Tanguy, or, for that matter, in Dali's magazine illustrations.

Unlike Charlotte's engulfing yellow stare, which from its first appearance drowned Harry's volition and will, in these initial encounters the flood is described as brown. It became yellow when it first blindsided the convict with inhuman force, leaving him baffled and prostrate at the bottom of his small skiff (122). Soon a wall of flood water, described as a phosphorescent "yellow turmoil," flung the Flood Madonna and the convict into a maelstrom:

now instead of space the skiff became abruptly surrounded by a welter of fleeing debris—planks, small buildings, the bodies of drowned yet antic animals, entire trees leaping and diving like porpoises, above which the skiff seemed to hover in weightless and airy indecision like a bird above a fleeing countryside. . . while the convict squatted in it still going through the motions of paddling, waiting for an opportunity to scream. (132)

Trees leaping like porpoises, antic corpses, a skiff hovering like a bird, its occupant locked in absurd repetition, unable to scream—depiction of the flood gave Faulkner scope to portray the landscapes of nightmare. These moments share the fantastic air that surrounds depictions of Charlotte's art. The same words re-appear: "nightmare," "bizarre," "paradoxical," "outrageous." Like Charlotte Rittenmeyer, the flood is a fount of furious, and surrealist, energy.

Also like the monstrous, engulfing, and implacable "Old Man," Charlotte's character is an unruly blend of oppositions—femininity and masculinity, object and subject. Furthermore, and unlike the "natural disaster" of the flood, Charlotte is both

modern woman and modern artist—her sculpture and earning power associate her with modernity, and it is her gaze rather than her body that carries the power to engulf. As a result, her character emerges as an ambiguous middle term among antitheticals. Like the real-life Meret Oppenheim, Charlotte is female subject, female artist, and female Surrealist, all within a cultural field that would make each of these positions oxymoronic. Here, then, is a figure far more destabilizing than Dali's "liquid ladies," which remained the objects of men's perception, or Fortune's fluid Venus, which blended the objects of mass consumption and mechanized warfare. Faulkner cast Charlotte Rittenmeyer as a perceiving subject who simultaneously marshaled the frightening power of the flood. The character was as unusual for Faulkner as she was for the era. As Anne Goodwyn Jones has observed, Faulkner treated the character with a respect "that is absent from his treatments of nearly every other sexually active and assertive and intelligent woman" in his fiction ("The Kotex Age" 3).

This respect is complicated, however, both by Charlotte's eventual death and by the fact that sexual autonomy, assertiveness, and intelligence remained masculine virtues in Jerusalem. Charlotte was consistently described in cross-gendered terms; she was both a "better man" and a "better gentleman" than her male peers (113). Instead of stabilizing at either pole, her character slid continually between gender roles. For example, in her love affair with Harry, Charlotte pursued a stereotypically feminine goal with masculine intensity. She sought to make love stay, a desire that appeared with frequency in contemporary mass media representations of women. But unlike these heroines, Charlotte pursued love with a concentrated fury. She rebuked Harry for trying to be a husband, and

she further distinguished her story from mass-media narratives by insisting that middle-class complacency killed love:

Listen: it's got to be all honeymoon, always. Forever and ever, until one of us dies. It can't be anything else. Either heaven, or hell: no comfortable safe peaceful purgatory between for you and me. . . . They say love dies between two people. That's wrong. It doesn't die. . . . you're the one that dies. It's like the ocean: if you're no good, if you begin to make a bad smell in it, it just spews you up somewhere to die. You die anyway, but I had rather drown in the ocean than be urped up onto a strip of dead beach. (71)

This quotation may serve as a summary of Charlotte Rittenmeyer's conceptions of love.

Unlike the sweet-smelling, frozen moments of well-ordered voyeurism that readers might find in *Life*, Charlotte equated love with the stench of death and the fluidity of the ocean.

The passage evoked the flood narrative that served as "The Wild Palm's" constant subtext, equating the lovers' affair with the inexorable disaster portrayed in "Old Man."

Although told from Harry's perspective, "The Wild Palms" is Charlotte's story, and she is its tragic hero. Her narrative is fundamentally a modern love story, and the aura of fated disaster that surrounded the lovers indicates that it is also a modernist love story, in the sense described by Eagleton. As Harry reveals in an early passage, mass society appears in "The Wild Palms" as a grinding and relentless power: "You are born submerged in anonymous lockstep with the teeming anonymous myriads of your time and generation; you get out of step once, falter once, and you are trampled to death" (46).

This vision—hero as road kill—is, of course, a distinguishing trope of modernist literature. Alienation from a mechanized society and a degraded and sensational mass culture is a continuing theme in both "The Wild Palms" and "Old Man." Harry maintained his faith in an eventual happy ending, guaranteed by Charlotte's strength and by love itself. However, as her equation of flood, love, and death in the passage above

indicates, Charlotte knew better. Her heroism lay primarily in her unblinking recognition of their fated doom.

Charlotte's story is, however, only half of the text that makes up Jerusalem. Its companion story, "Old Man," demonstrated a similar dependence on "mythological thinking." To further illuminate this fact, we must return to the other modern flood narratives discussed above, both of which were contemporary with "Old Man's" conception—the documentary film The River and the photojournalistic account of Life.

Critics have commented on Faulkner's use of the historical 1927 flood in the shaping of "Old Man." A far more immediate source presents itself in the Ohio Valley flood of 1937. Because the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers converge at Cairo, Illinois, the northern flood posed a grave threat to the lower Valley. For weeks newspapers spoke "in headlines two inches tall" about what might happen as the deluge moved south (Jerusalem 25).<sup>7</sup> During these two months, as the northern flood threatened his home and family in the Mississippi Delta, Faulkner worked or idled in Hollywood, a more-or-less willing prisoner of Darryl Zanuck and Twentieth-Century Fox (Blotner 950-53). There is good reason, then, to suspect that the author would read media accounts of the Ohio Valley flood with more than common interest. More importantly, "Old Man" demonstrates a number of parallels and inversions that connect its portrayal of the flood with those of The River and Life.

As demonstrated above, both the film and the magazine invited their audiences to identify with the sweeping perspective of a superhuman authority. Both texts



encompassed the flood's wide-ranging devastation by framing it within a rhetoric of collective action and control, using continental maps, rolling lists of cities, and aerial photography to structure an enveloping gaze. Both The River and Life, in other words, offered points of view homologous with those of the PWA's "institutional mind" and Time Inc.'s "eye with a brain." Jerusalem presents a similar example of mythological thinking, with one key difference. Unlike the institutional protagonists of The River and Life—both of which worked in the interests of individual citizens and consumers—Faulkner's modern authorities were malevolent, and their influence was baleful.

"Old Man" narrated the flood from the water rather than from above it, but the convict did meet a character embodying the instrumental gaze of the government agency, in the form of a doctor with "the coldest eyes the convict had ever seen—eyes. . .not looking at him but at the gushing blood with nothing in the world in them but complete impersonal interest" (203). To his outrage, the convict discovered that one of the flood waves he had fought was caused by this agency, which had dynamited the levee below New Orleans in order to protect the city (221). When it suited them, the authorities fabricated a story of the convict's heroic death (68), and they later added ten years to his sentence on a similar whim (279). In direct contrast to the heroic bureaucracies of the The River and Life, then, the convict inhabited a world where authority was cold-blooded, pestilent, and corrupt.

However, Jerusalem did present an example of a god-like perspective that closely resembled the institutional point of view constructed by The River and Life. This

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. front page articles in the New York Times on Jan. 24-31, 1937.

occurred in "The Wild Palms," as Harry Wilbourne waited for a train in downtown Chicago. Talking urgently with a secondary character, Harry is momentarily drowned out by a loudspeaker:

at this moment a voice cavernous and sourceless roared deliberately, a sentence in which could be distinguished a word now and then—"train", then others which the mind two or three seconds afterward recognized to be the names of cities far flung about the continent, cities seen rather than names heard, as if the listener (so enormous was the voice) were suspended in space watching the globy earth spin slowly out of its cradling cloud-wisps in fragmentary glimpses the evocative strange divisions of the sphere, spinning them on into fog and cloud again before vision and comprehension could quite grasp them. (114)

Although the difference in tone is dramatic, it is hard to imagine a closer approximation of the angles of vision structured by The River's aerial photography, continental maps, and off-screen narration. The film invited viewers to identify with camera and narrator, a point of view identical with that of a listener "suspended in space watching the globy earth spin." The difference here is crucial, however. While both Life and The River celebrated the clear vision and the technocracy which enabled a "properly visualized" disaster, Faulkner conveyed a vision fragmentary and obscure, overlaid with something closer to revulsion. What the loudspeaker interrupts is Harry's ranting screed against modernity:

[W]e have got rid of love at last as we have got rid of Christ. . . . If Jesus returned today we would have to crucify him quick in our own defense, to justify and preserve the civilization we have worked and suffered and died shrieking and cursing in rage and impotence and terror for two thousand years to create and perfect in man's own image; if Venus returned she would be a soiled man in a subway lavatory with a palm full of French post cards— (115)

Here, then, is Faulkner's own dream of a modern Venus. The combination of images is notable. A smarmy vision of pornographic photography is yoked to the

Crucifixion and the rage, (male) impotence, and terror of two thousand years. Given the aura of fated disaster that surrounds Harry Wilbourne and Charlotte Rittenmeyer, this particular confluence of sex, death, and the gods of modernity demands attention. "We have radio in place of God's voice," Harry states, "and instead of having to save emotional currency for months and years to deserve one chance to spend it all for love we can now spread it thin into coppers and titillate ourselves at any newsstand" (115). Venus returns as pornographer, selling French post cards and newsstand tabloids. In this modern wasteland, the gods of the Christian and Hellenic traditions are transformed into the machinery of mass communication.

However, what is most notable here is the form of Faulkner's critique. Staging Harry's individualist rant in the train station allows Faulkner to collapse the (mechanical) voice from on high on top of it. The scene, in other words, allowed Faulkner to mimic the effects of "the culture of systematic displacement," creating the chance meeting of two realities on an unfamiliar plane. And just as the scene recalled the techniques of Surrealist collage, it also mirrored the heterogeneous form of the picture magazine. If the loud speaker's evocation of documentary perspective suggested one of Life's favored genres, the pornography salesman recalled Life's fascination with showgirls, strippers, dancers, and models.

In fact, the train station sequence presents in microcosm the structure of the novel as a whole. Faulkner created, in "The Wild Palms," a version of the love stories retailed by modern journalism, depending on the structures of melodrama to reveal and escape the reification of human emotion. In "Old Man" he inverted media narratives of the flood, presenting a darkly comic story of quixotic individualism and self-serving authority. And,

finally, in the two stories' creation and publication, Faulkner inter-cut these examples-and-critiques of modernity's consciousness industries, depending on their own fundamental structures of uncanny juxtaposition to reveal their irrationalities. The character of Charlotte Rittenmeyer, then, offers a clue to the novel's structure, as Faulkner attempted to turn Surrealist experience toward cultural critique. Similarly, though, Charlotte's tragic fate marks the gender boundary that Faulkner's critique did not cross.

Among the reader's final visions of Charlotte, as seen through Harry's eyes, reveals the character nude, lying unconscious on a bed, dying from the botched abortion performed by her lover (238-39). To this point in the story, Charlotte's vision dominated the scene. Now, however, she was in agony, hemorrhaging, and soon she would be dead. In this late vision of his novel's hero, then, Faulkner made objectification final, collapsing death and sexualized display into a single, deeply disturbing image. The scene is written from Harry's point of view, and Charlotte's body was described as both caressed and illuminated by the "black wind" that served as metaphor for the doomed lovers' fate: "The whisper of the black wind filled the room but coming from nothing, so that presently it began to seem to him that the sound was rather. . .the rustle and murmur of faint dingy light itself on her flesh" (238-39). The black wind/dingy light itself was personified; Harry imagined during these final moments that Death was having sex with Charlotte, cuckolding him. He saw that her eyes were open, but they were now "profoundly empty of sentence."

Then he saw it begin: the I. It was like watching a fish rise in water—a dot, a minnow, and still increasing; in a second there would be no more pool but all sentence. He crossed to the bed in three strides, fast but quiet; he put his hand flat on her chest, his voice quiet, steady, insistent, "No,

Charlotte. Not yet. You can hear me. Go back. Go back now. It's all right now." (239)

Harry, "that bungling bastard Wilbourne," eased Charlotte's agony by insisting that she remain inanimate. Readers who have identified with Charlotte are likely to read these passages with some pain. Her quest ends with a kind of gore-nography, as Harry and the reader examine her nude body, newly become an object. Like the Surrealist images which figured the violence of systematic displacement through a fragmented and distorted female form, Jerusalem is finally complicit with the misogyny of the culture it critiqued. A female subject—at least an assertive, sexually autonomous female subject—remained an impossibility in modern life as Faulkner conceived it.

Making the violence of this injunction manifest, however, represented a small victory in itself. One of Jerusalem's achievements lay in its ability to articulate the effects of the broader culture's subject/object confluences. Despite Faulkner's dependence on dichotomies of male and female, artist and object in structuring his own identity as writer, Jerusalem indicted the culture that objectified human beings and eroticized objects. In its counterpoised critiques of modern love and modern heroism, the novel turned the tools of modernity against itself, achieving a deeply ambiguous and bitter jeremiad. The Sado-voyeurism of Charlotte's death, however, should be read as a symptom of the line that Faulkner's critique could not cross. Despite real-life examples like Meret Oppenheim and Margaret Bourke-White, "female artist" was finally an oxymoron that Jerusalem could not sustain.

## CHAPTER 5 AFTERWORD: WALTER BENJAMIN COMES TO LIFE

This chapter argues that the weekly picture magazine—a form pioneered by Germany's widely popular illustrierte Zeitungen ("illustrated magazines")—offers a neglected window onto the work of the German critic, historian, and philosopher Walter Benjamin. Despite explicit references to these magazines in Benjamin's influential Artwork essay, and despite clear parallels linking the formal and semiotic terrain of the illustrierte Zeitungen to Benjamin's theories of modern perception and historical knowledge, to this point these connections have gone relatively unmarked.<sup>1</sup> As an end to the present study and an opening onto future work, then, this chapter suggests that the picture magazines' correspondences to Benjamin's theory can shed important new light on both.

Scholars have long regarded Benjamin as a major theorist of photography, and analogies to the camera have proven just as definitive to his theories of perception and epistemology.<sup>2</sup> However, generalized discussions of Benjamin's relationship to "photography" neglect both differences among particular photographic practices and the

---

<sup>1</sup> A notable exception is Patrice Petro's analysis of the Weimar illustrierte Zeitungen in chapter 3 of *Joyless Streets*. See Petro also on some of the difficulties which have limited scholarly access to the historical sources (83 n. 7).

<sup>2</sup> Buck-Morss, Cadava, Hansen, and Puppe offer the most useful readings of Benjamin's theory/photography nexus.

importance of these distinctions within Benjamin's writings. Benjamin's canonization in British and American humanities departments has increased this tendency, as scholars in these disciplines have tended to read his work largely within the framework of their traditional concerns. There is, of course, good reason to celebrate Benjamin as Marxist literary critic, ground-breaking film theorist, and champion of the artistic avant garde. What dropped out of this culling process, however, was the picture magazine—a journalistic form outside the traditional domains of the humanities, and a medium with little resonance among a generation of critics reared in an era dominated by network television. The result is that the particular lessons Benjamin drew from the illustrierte Zeitungen have been largely ignored.

Nevertheless, the picture press exerted a considerable influence in post-WWI, Weimar, and Nazi Germany, the milieu that shaped Benjamin's intellectual maturity. Throughout these years Benjamin's home city of Berlin, for example, enjoyed one of the most creative and widely read picture weeklies in Europe, the Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung (BIZ).<sup>3</sup> In the twenties and thirties BIZ and other innovative German magazines—including the communist Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung (AIZ)—served as models for publishing ventures throughout the world, including Time Inc.'s Life (Rosenblum 461-65). Throughout these decades Benjamin himself published hundreds of articles in literary magazines and other periodicals, and his wife, Dora, worked for another large-

---

<sup>3</sup> In the late 1920s, BIZ's publisher, the liberal "House of Ullstein," claimed that the magazine was Europe's most widely read picture weekly (Gay 134). Forced to sell his properties and emigrate to the United States in 1934, Herman Ullstein later estimated BIZ's 1932 readership at between five and six million (Ullstein 233).

circulation illustrated magazine, Die Dame. As a result, the modernist photography and pictorial journalism of the German press offer a ready cognate for Benjamin's most ambitious theoretical project—his call for a "Copernican Revolution" in historiography (qtd. in Buck-Morss, Dialectics 338). Centered on the concept of the "dialectical image," this program envisioned a new way of writing history that would converge with revolutionary pedagogy. The dialectical image would tear artifacts from their moorings within the narratives of traditional history, and it would "constellate" these objects, alongside the ephemera of past and present, within politically charged, spatial configurations. As Benjamin put it in theoretical notes for his unfinished history of nineteenth-century Paris, "Method of this work: literary montage. I need say nothing. Only show" ("N" 5).<sup>4</sup> Self-consciously avant garde in its approach and intent, this method broke fundamentally with the canons of both history and philosophy, and it did so in ways consonant with the cognitive transformation that Benjamin diagnosed within the rise of the photographic media. Rejecting the traditions of Enlightenment rationality, Benjamin instead sought truth, in Susan Buck-Morss's paraphrase,

in the "garbage heap" of modern history, the "rags, the trash," the ruins of commodity production, that were thoroughly tainted with the philosophically debased qualities of empirical specificity, shifting meanings, and, above all, transiency. (Dialectics 217-18)

Nowhere is this more evident than in the formal and rhetorical lessons Benjamin took from contemporary photojournalism. Like news photography of all kinds, the dialectical

---

<sup>4</sup> These notes comprise a part of Benjamin's "arcades project," which remained in the research stages when Benjamin died in 1940 while fleeing the German Army. As Buck-Morss demonstrated in her important study of the project, Benjamin composed the notes from this section sometime between December 1937 and May 1940 (Dialectics 50-51).



image sought historical objects in their material immediacy, cultivating "the art of quoting without quotation marks" ("N" 3). Like the documentary filmmaking of the Soviet Union, the dialectical image privileged the formal and cognitive principles of montage. And like the Western picture magazines and newsreels (including Time Inc.'s March of Time, widely popular in Europe), the dialectical image juxtaposed the most dire and pressing historical events alongside images drawn from the fantasy worlds of commercial publicity and entertainment.

In contrast to film's relentless forward progress, however, Benjamin's method sought out moments of arrest and stasis: "When thinking reaches a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions, the dialectical image appears. This image is the caesura in the movement of thought" ("N" 24). This experience of seizure, of frozen arrest, was an crucial Benjaminian category, and its centrality helps illuminate the theorist's long fascination with still photography. In a retrospective essay, Theodor Adorno wrote that his friend's intensely focused gaze sought out those instants "in which historical movement halts and sediments into an image" ("Introduction" 12). This "incomparable experience," Adorno argued, was "similar only perhaps to the photographic snapping of an instant" ("Introduction" 12). Characteristically, though, here Adorno's sentence unraveled with one hand what it wove with the other. Its "only perhaps" should be read as a simultaneous affirmation and caution, suggesting that Benjamin's meditations on progressive cognitive/political experience (Erfahrung) can be aligned only problematically with the technical apparatus of photographic reproduction. The sentence's ambiguity recalls Adorno's well-known suspicion of the "techno-romantic" elements within the Artwork essay: Benjamin's too positive evaluation of the progressive potential

inherent in photographic mass culture ("Adorno to Benjamin" 120-26). Against this romanticization—which Adorno also discovered in many post-war celebrations of Benjamin's "The Author as Producer" and Artwork essays—Adorno insisted on the more esoteric and severe faces of Benjamin's critical-historical method.<sup>5</sup>

Under the sign of Adorno, then, I will stress that Benjamin's theory of the dialectical image gathered together a range of influences extending far beyond the picture magazines. The theory appears in multiple forms throughout the research and writings that occupied Benjamin after 1927, and its genesis and implications were in fact massively overdetermined. In addition to contemporary photojournalism, the dialectical image drew from most of Benjamin's wide-ranging intellectual interests: the German philosophical tradition spanning from Kant to Hegel to Marx; seventeenth-century German drama, nineteenth-century French poetry, and the twentieth-century avant garde; the popular culture of two centuries; and the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kaballah. The dialectical image was, moreover, intentionally ambiguous in its meanings and effects, refusing the self-identity and instrumental rationality that had marked Western thought since the Enlightenment.

Nevertheless, Benjamin's theory (also) should be read as an attempt to align his historical method with that of these most modern of pictorial media. Although Benjamin is often thought of as a film theorist, in fact the illustrierte Zeitungen represent the closest material embodiment of the dialectical image—those structures that would crystallize objects from past and present within a riveting, politically compelling form. Under

---

<sup>5</sup> Huyssen offers a useful overview of the Benjamin/Adorno dispute and its reception in

Benjamin's gaze, the ephemeral, plebian, and thoroughly commodified picture magazines became privileged sites of historical truth. Dialectical image-making would redeem the picture magazine's form, unlocking in the process the revelatory, progressive potential within these debased products of the culture industry.

This strategy became most explicit at a crucial juncture within the Artwork essay, where the illustrierte Zeitung appeared as both a source and a symptom of the leveling historical development that Benjamin diagnosed as the "decline of aura." To recap, first, this essay's now familiar argument: led by the invention of photography in 1839, the technologies of mass reproduction had radically re-shaped the status of the European artistic tradition, shattering, through their effortless and indiscriminate multiplication of visual imagery, the older experience of works of art as unique, authentic, and authoritative. In the modern arts of photography and film, this trend culminated in a decisive mutation. Mechanical reproducibility became intrinsic to these new arts' form and meaning, and this change in the nature of art manifest a parallel and equally historical transformation in the "natural" phenomena of human sense perception. Although seemingly biologically determined and unchanging, Benjamin argued, human perception was in fact shaped by historical circumstances (Illuminations 222). The contemporary decline of aura in aesthetic experience, therefore, was "symptomatic of a process whose significance points beyond the realm of art" (221). This was the realm of politics, and Benjamin drew upon the unprecedented popularity of the illustrierte Zeitungen to link this shattering of artistic and cultural tradition to contemporary mass political movements, including Soviet communism and German fascism:

---

post-war West Germany in chapter 8 of After the Great Divide.

Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its image or, rather, its copy, its reproduction. Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by illustrated magazines and newsreels differs from the image. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of things" has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of its reproduction. (223).<sup>6</sup>

By 1936 both the newsreels and the illustrated magazines claimed avid, weekly audiences of millions, and Benjamin argued that this popularity demonstrated the masses' affinity for the "tremendous shattering of tradition" launched by mechanical reproduction.<sup>7</sup> In other words, these popular, photographic chronicles of contemporary events formed the lynchpin of the Artwork essay's conjunction of art and politics, connecting the textual objects of aesthetic criticism to the historical objects of political critique. While German fascism demonstrated the negative image of this "adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality," the example of Soviet communism provided Benjamin with a more hopeful aspect of this trend (223). As Miriam Hansen has stated succinctly, the Artwork essay "oscillates between a description of technical innovations and their emancipative possibilities, between historical analysis and a utopian discourse of redemption" (210). Here, the illustrierte Zeitung provided a key locus for Benjamin's characteristic strategy of redemptive criticism, his attempt to distill the immanent utopian and progressive features inherent within mass culture.

---

<sup>6</sup> This translation includes modifications proposed by Miriam Hansen that restore Benjamin's distinction between the perceived "image" (Bild) and the "copy" (Abbild) or "reproduction" (Reproduktion) (Hansen 183).

<sup>7</sup> On Germany's inter-war publishing and film industries, see Gay, Petro, and Ullstein.

As a further step, then, toward tracing the congruencies linking Benjamin's theory to its material embodiment in the picture magazines, consider two claims about the nature of history: one made by Benjamin in the late 1930s, and one made by the American publisher of Life in 1942. In theoretical notes for his arcades project, Benjamin observed, "History breaks down into images, not into stories" ("N" 25). In 1942, Time Inc. founder Henry Luce called Life's editors "the real historians of the day" (qtd. in Herzstein 252).

The contexts of these two observations were profoundly different—so different, in fact, that it is tempting to argue that here similar wording masks a complete lack of correspondence. Benjamin's understandings of "history," "image," and "story," in this view, were so distant from Luce's that their observations may as well have been made on different planets. For Benjamin, the images into which history decomposed were dialektisch Bilden—dialectical images—his idiosyncratic blending of philosophical concept, historical artifact, and literary figure. Benjamin called these amphibian things Bilden, a word that carries the same strongly visual references shared by its English cognate "image." More than photographs in any simple sense, however, dialectical images were objects with multivalent and ambiguous meaning, "torn out of history" and cobbled together in an attempt to seize the past "as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (Illuminations 255).

Henry Luce's observation, on the other hand, appeared in a speech arguing that war-time austerity measures shouldn't prevent Americans from enjoying their four million weekly copies of Life. As a Luce biographer put it, the publisher

seemed to believe that a determined America could both win the war and enjoy the bounty offered by its fruited plain. To Luce, this approach to life was not contradictory....Life, with its consumer fantasies and bright

pictures, was America....The preservation of the fantasies and dreams produced by his picture magazine was one of Henry Luce's war aims. Indeed, he was fighting for the American Way of Life. (Herzstein 252)

Few points of view might seem further removed from those of the erudite and elegiac German thinker, or from Benjamin's final conception of history as one single, dark catastrophe "which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (Illuminations 257).

Nevertheless, in one of its faces the dialectical image appeared as utopian wish-image: durable, insistent, collective dreams of a human society finally confirmed in material abundance and egalitarian social relations. For example, in tracing the similarities linking nineteenth-century commercial innovations to the utopian visions of the social theorist Charles Fourier, Benjamin observed that these images "are wishful fantasies, and in them the collective seeks both to preserve and to transfigure the inchoateness of the social product and the deficiencies in the social system of production" (Reflections 148). In however degraded and commodified a form, advertising served the valuable function of expressing these fantasies. The trick, for the historical materialist, lay in constructing a shocking confrontation of these dreams with their own unreality—forcing a confrontation of the fact that industrial civilization's mastery of nature had yielded more human suffering rather than less.

In other words, Life's peculiar form—its juxtapositions of "consumer fantasies and bright pictures" opposite the fragmentary, often traumatic realism of news photography—closely approximated the structures sought out by Benjamin's progressive, historical-materialist method. Particularly in the war-torn years of the late thirties and early forties, these combinations coalesced within the picture magazines of Europe and the United States to form a semiotic terrain of violent contrasts, linking the dream-images

of utopian fantasy with shocking, grisly images of death and devastation. It was this combination—an allegorical structure that aligned idealist and materialist photographic discourses while maintaining a demarcation between the two—that suggests the most telling influence of the picture magazine on Benjamin's conceptions of history.

Because these parallels were fundamentally pictorial, they may be best demonstrated by drawing together Benjamin's dialectical image, as it appeared in the Artwork essay, with a contemporary text taken from the pages of BIZ. On a full page of its December 29, 1936, issue, the magazine printed an photograph taken during the opening ceremonies of the 1936 Olympic games, held that summer in Berlin (2119). The Olympics had provided the Nazi government with a world stage for its vision of the new Germany: an orderly, harmonious, and modern society in profound contrast to the social and economic chaos that had marked the previous decades. Official interpretations used the occasion to trace the lineage of the Third Reich to an "Aryan" ancient Greece, laying claim in one moment both to the most modern of international spectacles and the most revered of European cultural traditions. In addition to financing Leni Riefenstahl's award-winning documentary film Olympia, the Nazi government tightly controlled coverage by the German press.<sup>8</sup> The photograph printed by BIZ in December conformed to government directives, presenting readers with a high-angle shot composed of bold, clean lines, picturing athletes marching in military formation around a curved stadium track, honored by Nazi salutes from a massed and orderly crowd. Its caption stressed that

---

<sup>8</sup> For a useful overview of the German government's claims on the legacies of Greece and of efforts its control and standardize Olympic press coverage, see The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936.

this summer the German people had acted as hosts for "the greatest international demonstration of peace and culture of this era" (2119).<sup>9</sup>

Unquestionably, then, the photograph and caption offered an impressive example of Nazi propaganda—the fascist "aesthetization of politics" critiqued by Benjamin in his Artwork essay earlier that year. Ostensibly a celebration of the ancient rites of natural athletic prowess, the 1936 Olympics instead appeared in BIZ as a triumph for the Führer's "gigantic structures" and social organization, both of which earned the "absolute admiration of the contestants as well as the guests" (2119).

Such fascist aesthetics—the worship of idealized, masculine bodies, monumental architecture, and homogeneous, synchronized culture—depended on the symbols of classical antiquity to sustain the illusion of a continuous bond between the past and present of Western civilization. In contrast, the Artwork essay equated these mass spectacles with the most reactionary aspects of modern industrial society, and in notes for the essay Benjamin wrote simply, "Olympics are reactionary" (Illuminations 251 n. 21). Four years later Benjamin vilified the notion that history could be viewed as a triumphal procession carrying with it a treasured cultural past. He argued instead that this represented the most poisonous of errors: "Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current" of historical progress (Illuminations 258).

As an antidote to such fascist spectacles, the Artwork essay looked to the dialectical image, embodied in essay's final sentence: "Communism responds by

---

<sup>9</sup> This and the other BIZ translations made by Heinke Sellers in 1998.



politicizing art." This vision of a true avant garde—a political/symbolic practice that would foreclose and transcend fascism's aestheticization of politics—remains one of Benjamin's most enigmatic and compelling dreams. Serving as the subtext for the essay's more hopeful understandings of mechanical reproduction, this vision depended on Benjamin's readings of three separate avant-garde forms: the anarchic, explosive gesture of Dada, the analytic, montage construction of Soviet Constructivism, and the uncanny encounter and dream-logic of Surrealism. In this guise, the dialectical image represented a revolutionary intervention into the history of human perception. It would trigger a violent rupture of the ideological boundaries that enabled and constrained modern consciousness. It would awaken the masses from the dream of historical progress, bringing recognition of the fact that the current state of emergency was the rule of history, not its exception (*Illuminations* 257).

Just how this revolutionary pedagogy would occur—what concrete forms Benjamin's dialectical image-making might finally have taken—is a matter of some dispute.<sup>10</sup> There can be no final answer to this question, but the dramatically successful innovations of photographic journalism in these years clearly shaped the Artwork essay's understanding of political praxis. Film was the essay's privileged medium, and its connections to Benjamin's understandings of historiography and revolutionary pedagogy

---

<sup>10</sup> Adorno argued that the ultimate form of Benjamin's arcades project would "eliminate all overt commentary and to have the meanings emerge solely through a shock-like montage of the material." ("Portrait" 239). The editor of Benjamin's complete works, Rolf Tiedemann, disagreed. Buck-Morss offers a good summary of this dispute (*Dialectics* 72-73).

have been well documented.<sup>11</sup> However, Benjamin's conception of the dialectical image also depended on the picture magazine, an equally popular form that deployed riveting confrontations of radically divergent systems of representation. To demonstrate this fact, we need only look across the page from the Olympic photograph.

Opposite its image of the Nazi Olympics, BIZ published another extraordinary and powerful photograph. This image presented a detail from one of the photographs published by Rehearsal three months earlier: eight corpses of Carmelite nuns, exhumed and displayed on the steps of a cathedral. A good example of the picture magazine's fascination with corpses, the photograph also recorded an act of brutal iconoclasm. The act itself—an anarchic attack on the Church's power as the opiate of the masses—offered a profound example of what Benjamin called the shattering of symbolic and cult value.

The photograph of this act—in immediate contrast to the smooth and sweeping curves of the Olympic image on the opposite page—appears chaotic, angular, and frenzied. The intersecting, diangular lines of the stone steps and coffins combine with the grotesquerie of the mangled corpses to form an image of expressionist intensity. Yet the corpses' stillness, combined with the photograph's capture of a fragment in time, give the image a contradictory aspect; the image appears as frozen relic, a scene of deathly calm. It offers its readers a vision homologous, in other words, with a moment "when thinking reaches a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions" ("N" 24).

Alone, the photograph retains its power to compel attention. But it is in

---

<sup>11</sup> Among the best discussions of film's relationship to the Artwork essay are Hansen's "Blue Flower in the Land of Technology" and Buck-Morss's "Aesthetics and Anesthetics."

combination with the Olympic image that it presents its most fascinating and difficult face. The Barcelona photograph was journalistic, made for the purpose of establishing evidence. In this form, as Benjamin wrote of the photographer Eugene Atget, "exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to ritual value":

With Atget, photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance. They demand a special kind of approach; free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to them. They stir the viewer; he feels challenged by them in a new way. (*Illuminations* 226)

Unlike the celebratory image of the Olympics, which resembles fine art in its affirmation of dominant social structures, the gruesome strangeness and evidentiary quality of the Barcelona photograph challenges and stirs. Published on opposite pages, however, these two unrelated images appeared to *BIZ*'s readers within the same temporal and spatial field. Their combination forms a bizarre meta-image, and a tacit but powerful political argument connects them. Although the pages' captions make no reference to one another, we may read a coherent, political point in their construction of the photographs' meanings. Like the caption on the opposing page, the Barcelona caption framed the events in an explicitly pro-fascist fashion: "What the National Socialist revolution prevented in 1933 at the last moment became horrible reality in Spain" (2118). The horrifying abominations of communist Barcelona, then, contrasted with the peaceful, well-ordered society of Nazi Germany. The idealized image of dignified, nationalist celebration on the opposite page offered a concrete example of the fruits of the Nazi victory.

Absent these captions, however, the juxtaposition opens onto a multiple and shifting array of interpretations, much like the meeting of corporate optimism and flood

devastation in Bourke-White's "At the Time of the Louisville Flood." The guiding hand provided by BIZ's captions, in other words, demonstrates a point made explicit by the Artwork essay. As photography became increasingly central to modern readers' visual worlds, Benjamin argued,

picture magazines begin to put up signposts for [them], right ones or wrong ones, no matter....The directives which the captions give to those looking at pictures in illustrated magazines soon become even more explicit and more imperative in the film where the meaning of each single picture appears to be prescribed by the sequence of all preceding ones. (226)

History as dialectical image, on the other hand, would do away with this bourgeois insistence on singular and self-identical meaning. It would free images to shift into multiple alignments, thereby freeing interpreters to recognize the complex multiplicity within their historical and social object-worlds. Benjamin's earliest references to the dialectical image suggests that its privileged sign is ambiguity; the "montage construction" that he developed to enact these structures often resulted in dense compilations of figure, aphorism, and quotation, juxtaposed with little or no critical leavening. Readers were left to uncover/construct the multiple and overdetermined connections among diverse textual fragments. Adorno spoke of the rebus as his friend's philosophical model; Benjamin sought essences through "methodic conjecture within a configuration of individually opaque elements" ("Portrait" 230). Following the thread of this observation, an intellectual biographer noted that Benjamin's discourse resembled "a collage of images which, like a work of art that kindles one's fascination, beseeches interpretation or decipherment" (Wolin xi). Unquestionably, Benjamin's most original and characteristic writings—on history, philosophy, and culture—are inextricably linked

to pictures and picture making. The BIZ juxtaposition begins to illuminate the debt that his chosen form owed to the condensations of realism and fantasy submerged within the workings of the picture magazine.

## LIST OF REFERENCES

- "92136-20." Press Release. Museum of Modern Art Archives. Department of Circulating Exhibitions. Vincent van Gogh exhibition II.1/1(9).
- "122735-43." Press Release. Museum of Modern Art Archives. Department of Circulating Exhibitions. Vincent van Gogh exhibition II.1/1(9).
- Adorno, Theodor W. "Adorno to Benjamin." Bloch et al. Aesthetics and Politics. London: Verso, 1977. 120-26.
- . "Introduction to Benjamin's Schriften." Trans. R. Hullot-Kentor. On Walter Benjamin. Ed. Gary Smith. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1988. 2-17.
- . "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin." Prisms. 227-41.
- . Prisms. Trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1967.
- Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. Dialectic of Enlightenment. Trans. John Cumming. New York: Continuum, 1993.
- Agee, James. "Art for What's Sake." New Masses 15 Dec. 1936: 48+.
- Agee, James, and Walker Evans. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Boston: Houghton, 1941.
- Alexander, Stephen. "In Search of Truth." New Masses 26 Nov. 1935: 29-30.
- "All-Time High: Modern Museum." American Magazine of Art Feb. 1936: 120.
- "America's Worst Flood Makes Nearly a Million Refugees." Life 8 Feb. 1937: 9-23.
- American Red Cross. The Ohio-Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1937. Washington D.C., 1937.
- Anderson, James, ed. Roy Stryker: The Humane Propagandist. Louisville, KY: U Louisville, 1977.
- "Art Progenies." Art News 10 Nov. 1935. Goodyear. N. pag.

Baier, Lesley K. Walker Evans at Fortune 1945-65. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Museum, 1977.

"Banking, Group and Branch." Fortune Feb. 1930: 63+.

Barnard, Rita. The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance. New York: Cambridge UP, 1995.

Barr Jr., Alfred H., ed. Vincent van Gogh. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966.

Barthes, Roland. Image-Music-Text. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Noonday P, 1977.

Baughman, James L. Henry R. Luce and the Rise of the American News Media. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987.

Bazin, André. What is Cinema? Trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley: U of California P, 1967.

Bell, Daniel, et al. Writing for Fortune. New York: Time, 1980.

Bell Telephone System. "How Much Does the Telephone Save?" Advertisement. Life 8 Feb. 1937: 8.

Benjamin, Walter. Illuminations. Trans. Harry Zohn. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1968.

---. "N [RE The Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]." Trans. Leigh Hafrey and Richard Sieburth. Philosophical Forum XV.1-2 (Fall-Winter 1983-84): 1-40.

---. Reflections. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Ed. Peter Demetz. New York: Schocken, 1978.

Benson, Gertrude R. "Exploding the van Gogh Myth." American Magazine of Art 29.1 (Jan. 1936): 6-16.

Bergman, Andrew. We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1971.

Bessie, Simon Michael. Jazz Journalism: The Story of the Tabloid Newspapers. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1938.

Bleyer, Willard Grosvenor. Journalism. Chicago: American Library Association, 1929.

Blotner, Joseph. Faulkner: A Biography. 2 vols. New York: Random House, 1974.

Bourke-White, Margaret. Eyes on Russia. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931.

- . "Pig Dust." Intaglio Print. Fortune Feb. 1930: 61.
- . Portrait of Myself. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963.
- . "A Tube where Anthracite Goes Traveling Underground." Intaglio Print. Fortune Feb. 1931: 81.
- Brooks, Cleanth. "The Tradition of Courtly Love in The Wild Palms." Mississippi Quarterly 25.3 (1972): 265-87.
- Brown, J.L. "Picture Magazines and Morons." American Mercury Dec. 1938: 404-08.
- Brown, Theodore M. Margaret Bourke-White, Photojournalist. Ithaca, NY: Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1972.
- Bürger, Peter. Theory of the Avant-Garde. Trans. Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered." October 61 (Fall 1992): 3-42.
- . The Dialectics of Seeing. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1991.
- Cadava, Eduardo. Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1997.
- Caldwell, Erskine and Margaret Bourke-White. You Have Seen Their Faces. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1937.
- Callahan, Sean, ed. The Photographs of Margaret Bourke-White. Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1972.
- Carlton, David L. and Peter A. Coclanis, eds. Confronting Southern Poverty in the Great Depression: The Report on Economic Conditions of the South with Related Documents. Boston: Bedford Books-St. Martin's, 1996.
- Caspers, Frank. "Surrealism in Overalls." Scribner's August 1938: 17-21.
- Caws, Mary Ann, Rudolf Kuenzli, and Gwen Raaberg, eds. Surrealism and Women. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1991.
- Chamberlain, John. "How I Really Learned about Business." Bell et al. 23-36.



Charles Daniel Frey Agency. "In the Hollow of Her Hand." Advertisement. Fortune Feb. 1930: 139.

"Cloak & Suit" Fortune June 1930: 92+.

Cockcroft, Eva. "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War." Artforum 12.10 (June 1974): 39-41.

Cortisoz, Royal. "The Emotional Art of Vincent van Gogh." New York Herald Tribune 10 Nov. 1935. Goodyear. N. pag.

Creese, Walter L. TVA's Public Planning: the Vision, the Reality. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1990.

Crimp, Douglass. "The Museum's Old/The Library's New Subject." The Contest of Meaning. Ed. Richard Bolton. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1989. 3-13.

Curtis, James. Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989.

Daniel, Peter, et al. Official Images: New Deal Photography. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution P, 1987.

Derrida, Jacques. "Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing." Trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. The Truth in Painting. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987. 255-382.

Eagleton, Terry. The Ideology of the Aesthetic. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990.

Edwards, Jackson. "One Every Minute." Scribner's May 1938: 17+.

Eisenstein, Sergei. Film Form. Trans. Jay Leyda. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1977.

Eldred, Janet Carey. "Faulkner's Still Life: Art and Abortion in The Wild Palms." Faulkner Journal IV.1-2 (1988-89): 139-58.

Elson, Robert T. Time Inc. Ed. Duncan Norton-Taylor. Vol. 1. 2 vols. New York: Atheneum, 1968.

Erbes Jr., P. H. "Surrealism Invades Advertising (or is It Vice Versa?)." Printers' Ink 3 Dec. 1943: 22-23.

Ernst, Max. Max Ernst: Beyond Painting. Trans. Dorothea Tanning, et al. New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1948.

Evans, Walker. "Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Family," 1936. Gelatin Silver Print. Farm Security Administration Collection, Library of Congress. Washington, D.C. (LC-USF342-8147A).

---. ["Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife" Allie Mae Burroughs], 1936. Agee and Evans. N. pag.

---. "Alabama Tenant Farmer" [Floyd Burroughs], 1936. Gelatin Silver Print. Farm Security Administration Collection, Library of Congress. Washington, D.C. (LC-USF342-8138A).

---. American Photographs. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1938.

---. "Butcher Sign, Mississippi," 1936. Letterpress Print. American Photographs part 2, no. 31.

---. "Farm Kitchen, Alabama," 1936. Gelatin Silver Print. Farm Security Administration Collection, Library of Congress. Washington, D.C. (LC-USF342-8143A).

---. "Floyd Burroughs' Work Shoes," 1936. Gelatin Silver Print. Farm Security Administration Collection, Library of Congress. Washington, D.C. (LC-USZ62-17922).

---. "Interior Detail, West Virginia Coal Miner's House," 1935. Letterpress Print. American Photographs part 1, no. 23.

---. "Lucille Burroughs Picking Cotton," 1936. Gelatin Silver Print. Farm Security Administration Collection, Library of Congress. Washington, D.C. (LC-USF33-31341-frame 7).

---. "Landowner," 1936. Gelatin Silver Print. Farm Security Administration Collection, Library of Congress. Washington, D.C. (LC-USF342-8127A).

---. "Wash Room and Dining Area of Floyd Burroughs' Home," 1936. Gelatin Silver Print. Farm Security Administration Collection, Library of Congress. Washington, D.C. (LC-USF342-812A).

de la Faille, J.-B. The Works of Vincent van Gogh: His Paintings and Drawings. revised ed. New York: Reynal & Company, 1970.

Faulkner, William. If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem. New York: Vintage-Random House, 1995.

Fisher, Andrea. Let Us Now Praise Famous Women. New York: Pandora P, 1987.

"The Flood Leaves Its Victims on the Bread Line." Life 15 Feb. 1937: 9-13.

"For Release." Press Release. Museum of Modern Art Archives. Department of Circulating Exhibitions. Walker Evans II.1/34(12): 1-2.

Gay, Peter. Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.

"Germany in the Workshop." Fortune Dec. 1930: 89+.

Goldberg, Vicki. Margaret Bourke-White, a Biography. New York: Harper and Row, 1986.

Goodyear, A. Conger. Goodyear 37: Van Gogh Exhibition. Scrapbook. Department of Circulating Exhibitions. Museum of Modern Art Archives. New York.

---. The Museum of Modern Art: The First Ten Years. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943.

Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism. Ed. John O'Brian. Vol. 1. 2 vols. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1986. 5-22.

Grierson, John. Grierson on Documentary. Ed. Forsyth Hardy. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971.

Guilbaut, Serge. "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America." October 15 (Winter 1980): 61-78.

Guimond, James. American Photography and the American Dream. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991.

Hansen, Miriam. "Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology.'" New German Critique 40 (1987): 179-224.

Hargrove, Erwin C. and Paul K. Conkin. TVA: Fifty Years of Grass-Roots Bureaucracy. Urbana, IL: U Illinois P, 1983.

Harriman, Margaret Case. "A Dream Walking." New Yorker 1 July 1939: 22-27.

Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art." Trans. Albert Hofstadter. Poetry, Language, Thought. NY: Harper, 1971. 17-87.

H.J. Heinz Co. "The Good Green Earth." Advertisement. Life 15 Feb. 1937: 8.

Herzstein, Robert E. Henry R. Luce: A Political Portrait of the Man Who Created the American Century. New York: Scribner's, 1994.

Heugten, Sjraar van. "Vincent Van Gogh as a Hero of Fiction." Trans. Yvette Rosenberg. The Mythology of Vincent van Gogh. Eds. Kōdera Tsukasa and (English edition) Yvette Rosenberg. Tokyo: Asahi National Broadcasting, 1993. 161-173.

"The History of Western Sculpture: Modern sculpture: The 20th Century: Sculpture of fantasy (1920-45)." Britannica Online. 22 November 1998.  
<<http://www.eb.com:180/cgi-bin/g?DocF=macro/5005/70/62.html>>.

Hurley, F. Jack. Portrait of a Decade. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1972.

Huyssen, Andreas. After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism. Bloomington, ID: Indiana UP, 1986.

International Salt Company. "Fabric Magic!" Advertisement. Fortune Sept. 1940: 27.

Jameson, Fredric. Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Durham: Duke UP, 1991.

Jewell, Edward Alden. "Realm of Art: The Warfare That Was Van Gogh." New York Times 10 Nov. 1935, sec. 9: 9.

Jillson, Willard Rouse. The Great Flood of 1937 in Louisville, Kentucky. Louisville, KY: Standard Printing Co., 1937.

Jones, Anne Goodwyn. "'The Kotex Age': Women, Popular Culture, and The Wild Palms." ts.

---. "The Work of Gender in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." Southern Historical Association Convention. Fort Worth, TX, 13 Nov. 1991.

Kalaidjian, Walter. American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique. New York: Columbia UP, 1993.

Kaufmann & Fabry. "The Shoemaker's Last." Intaglio Print. Fortune March 1933: 71.

---. "Shoes without Souls: A Study in Expression." Intaglio Print. Fortune March 1933: 86.

Kawin, Bruce. "The Montage Element in Faulkner's Fiction." Faulkner, Modernism, and Film. Ed. Evans Harrington and Ann. J. Abadie. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 1979. 103-26.

Kirstein, Lincoln. "Photographs of America: Walker Evans." Walker Evans. American Photographs. 189-98.

Lane, James. W. "Current Exhibitions." Parnassus 7.7 (Dec. 1935). Goodyear. N. pag.

Lange, Dorothea and Paul Schuster Taylor. An America Exodus. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939.

Lears, Jackson. "Packaging the Folk." Folk Roots, New Roots. Eds. Jane Franco and Barbara Becker. Lexington, MA: Museum of Our National Heritage, 1988.

Levy, Julien. Memoir of an Art Gallery. New York: Putman Sons, 1977.

Lorenz, Pare. "Putting American on Record." Saturday Review of Literature 17 Dec. 1938: 6.

---, dir. The River. United States Farm Security Administration, film, 1937.

Lyndgate, William A. "Romantic Business." Scribner's Sept. 1938: 17+.

Lynes, Russell. Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art. New York: Atheneum, 1973.

Macdonald, Dwight. "'Fortune' Magazine." Nation 8 May 1937: 527-30.

MacLeish, Archibald. "The First Nine Years." Bell et al. 5-12.

Marchand, Roland. Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940. Berkeley: U of California P, 1985.

Marquis, Alice. Alfred H. Barr, Jr.: Missionary for the Modern. Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989.

Marx, Karl. Capital. Trans. Ben Fowkes. Vol. I. 4 vols. New York: Vintage-Random House, 1977.

Matter-Bourges. "American Dream of Venus." Illus. in "Plastics in 1940." Fortune October 1940: 88-89.

Maxwell House Coffee. "The Friendly Stimulation." Advertisement. Rehearsal 24 Sept. 1936: 45.

- McBride, Herbert. "The Art of Vincent van Gogh." New York Sun 9 Nov. 1935. Goodyear. N. pag.
- McDermott, William F. "McDermott on van Gogh." Cleveland Plain Dealer 12 April 1936. Goodyear. N. pag.
- McHancy, Thomas L., ed. William Faulkner Manuscripts 14. Vol. I. 2 vols. New York: Garland, 1986.
- . William Faulkner's The Wild Palms. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 1975.
- Meier-Graefe, Julius. Vincent van Gogh. Trans. John Holroyd-Reece. New York: Harcourt, 1933.
- Millier, Arthur. "Photo Shows Greet Camera Centenary." Los Angeles Times 15 Jan. 1939: N. pag.
- Mott, Frank Luther. American Journalism. New York: Macmillan, 1950.
- Mullen, Bill and Sherry Lee Linkon, eds. Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930s Culture. Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1996.
- Natanson, Nicholas. The Black Image in the New Deal. Knoxville: U Tennessee P, 1992.
- The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 22 Nov. 1998. <<http://www.ushmm.org/olympics/zindex.htm>>.
- Nichols, Bill. Representing Reality. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.
- Olin, Margaret. "'It is Not Going to be Easy to Look into Their Eyes': Privilege of Perception in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." Art History 14.1 (1991): 92-115.
- Petro, Patrice. Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1989.
- Phillips, Christopher. "The Judgment Seat of Photography." The Contest of Meaning. Ed. Richard Bolton. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1989. 14-47.
- Plaskon Molded Color. "Charge to Mrs. Carter." Advertisement. Fortune Nov. 1938: 111.
- "Plastics in 1940." Fortune Oct. 1940: 88+.
- Puppe, Heinz W. "Walter Benjamin on Photography." Colloquia Germanica 12.3 (1979): 273-91.

Rabinowitz, Paula. They Must Be Represented. London: Verso, 1994.

Rathbone, Belinda. Walker Evans: A Biography. Boston: Houghton, 1995.

"Recorded Time." Time 3 Oct. 1938: 43.

Reed, T.V. Fifteen Jugglers, Five Believers. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992.

Robinson, David. The History of World Cinema. New York: Stein and Day, 1973.

Rosenberg, Harold. "Peasants and Pure Art." Art Front (Jan. 1936): 5-6.

Rosenblum, Naomi. A World History of Photography. New York: Abbeville P, 1989.

"Seen in Catalonia." Rehearsal 24 Sept. 1936: 44.

Solomon R.Guggenheim Museum. The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992.

"Southern Accent." Fortune March 1933: 71+.

Spence, Steven A. "The Politics of Representation in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." Masters Thesis. Florida Atlantic U, 1992.

Stein, Sally. "The Graphic Ordering of Desire." The Contest of Meaning. Ed. Richard Bolton. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1992. 145-161.

Steinem, Gloria. "'Anonymous' Was a Woman." Rev. of Born Female by Caroline Bird with Sarah Welles Briller. New York Times Book Review 11 Aug. 1968: 8.

Stevens, Lawrence. Letter. Art News 8 Feb. 1936. Goodyear. N. pag.

Stone, Irving. Lust for Life. New York: Heritage P, 1936.

---. "Tortured Soul." Reader's Digest March 1936: 115-24.

Stott, William. Documentary Expression and Thirties America. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986.

Suleiman, Susan Rubin. Subversive Intent. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1990.

Sussman, Warren I. "The Thirties." The Development of an American Culture. Eds. Stanley Coben and Lorman Ratner. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970. 179-218.

Szarkowski, John. Introduction. Walker Evans. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971. N. pag.

Tagg, John. The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories. Amherst: U of Mass. P, 1988.

Tashjian, Dickran. A Boatload of Madmen : Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde, 1920-1950. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995.

Time Inc. "Boomerang." Advertisement. Fortune Nov. 1930: 139.

---. "Fortune." Advertisement. Time 27 Jan. 1930: 45.

---. "Life and the News." Advertisement. Life 15 March 1937: 4-5.

---. "A New Informing Force." Advertisement. Fortune Nov. 1937: 56.

---. "A Subscription to Fortune." Advertisement. Fortune Dec. 1934: 189.

---. "We Think Ignorance Has Been Getting Too Much Publicity." Advertisement. Fortune Jan. 1939:132-33.

Trachtenberg, Alan. Reading American Photographs. New York: Hill and Wang: Noonday P, 1989.

Trilling, Lionel. "Greatness with One Fault in It." Rev. of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, by James Agee and Walker Evans. Kenyon Review 4 (Winter 1942). 99-102.

"Tsaa-a, Tsaa-a, Tsaa-a." Fortune Feb. 1930: 55-61.

Ullstein, Herman. The Rise and Fall of the House of Ullstein. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1943.

United States. National Emergency Council. Report on Economic Conditions of the South. New York: Da Capo P, 1972.

---. Public Works Administration. Report of the Mississippi Valley Committee of the Public Works Administration. Washington: GPO, 1934.

---. Resettlement Administration. First Annual Report. Washington: GPO, 1936.

van Gogh, Vincent. La Berceuse: Mme. Augustine Roulin, 1889. Oil on Canvas. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo. (F 504).




- . The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh. 2nd ed. Vol. 2. 2 vols. Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1959.
- . Dear Theo: The Autobiography of Vincent van Gogh. Ed. Irving Stone. Boston: Houghton, 1937.
- . "Head of a Woman with Dark Cap," 1883. Pen and Ink on Ordinary Paper, Washed. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo. (F 1073).
- . The Night Café on the Place Lamartine, Arles, 1888. Oil on Canvas. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. (F 463).
- . A Pair of Boots, 1887. Oil on Canvas. Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore. (F 333). Illus. in Jameson, N. pag.
- . A Pair of Shoes, 1886. Oil on Canvas. Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam. (F 255).
- . Père Tanguy, 1887. Oil on Canvas. Musée Rodin, Paris. (F 363).
- . "Peasant Woman Binding Sheaves: Facing Right," 1885. Black Chalk on Dutch Laid Paper, Lightly Washed. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo. (F 1262).
- . "Peasant Woman Binding Wheat: Stooping, Seen from the Front," 1885. Black Chalk on Wove Paper, Washed. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo. (F 1264).
- . Portrait of Patience Escalier, Shepherd in the Provence, 1888. Oil on Canvas. Heirs of A. Chester Beatty, London. (F 444).
- . Portrait of an Actor, 1888. Oil on Canvas. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo. (F 533).
- . Potato Eaters, 1885. Oil on Canvas. Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam. (F 82).
- . The Starry Night, 1889. Oil on Canvas. Museum of Modern Art, New York. (F 612).
- . Still Life: A Pair of Shoes, 1888. Oil on Canvas. Musée National du Louvre, Paris. (F 461).
- . Still Life: Vase with Fourteen Sunflowers, 1889. Oil on Canvas. Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam. (F 458).

- . Van Gogh's Bedroom in Arles, 1888. Oil on Canvas. Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam. (F 482).
- . The Weaver: Interior with Three Windows, 1884. Oil on Canvas. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo. (F 37).
- . The Wheatfield Behind Saint Paul's Hospital at the fall of the Day with a Reaper, 1889. Oil on Canvas. Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam. (F 618).
- Wainwright, Loudon. The Great American Magazine: An Inside History of Life. New York : Knopf, 1986.
- Warhol, Andy. Diamond Dust Shoes. Silkscreen Print. Estate and Foundation of Andy Warhol, New York. Illus. in Jameson, N. pag.
- Wolin, Richard. Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Zemel, Carol. The Formation of a Legend: Van Gogh Criticism, 1890-1920. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research P, 1980.
- . Van Gogh's Progress. Berkeley: U California P, 1997.


### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Steve Spence lives in Atlanta, Georgia, and works as a tenure-track instructor in the Department of Humanities at Clayton College and State University, a part of the Georgia university system. He holds a master's degree in English from Florida Atlantic University and a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Florida.


I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

  
Marsha Bryant, Chair  
Associate Professor of English


I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

  
John Cech  
Professor of  
English

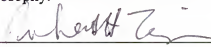
I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

  
Scott Nygren  
Associate Professor of  
English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

  
Maureen Turim  
Professor of  
English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

  
Robert H. Zieger  
Distinguished Professor of  
History

This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

May 1999

---

Dean, Graduate School